



## The Work Discussion Guide

Director: Jairus McLeary & Gethin Aldous

Year: 2017

Time: 89 min

**You might know these directors from:**

This is the debut feature film from this directorial team.

## FILM SUMMARY

California's Folsom State Prison is a maximum security penitentiary that has served as the home of Charles Manson; played host to Johnny Cash's famous jailhouse performances; and houses murderers, rapists, and lifelong criminals within its barbed-wire-wrapped barricades. Behind its walls, scores of men have met since 1997 for an annual intensive four-day group therapy process that first-time directors Jairus McLeary and Gethin Aldous have deemed THE WORK. Their intensely emotional debut documents the first time cameras have been allowed past prison guards to witness the wholly unique remedial process as it tenuously unfolds.

Founded by Rob Allbee (a longtime volunteer creative writing instructor at the prison), staffed by James McLeary (a clinical psychologist), and led by a team of experienced inmates who have long participated in the program, the Inside Circle Foundation's self-help discussion group therapy program was designed to allow prisoners to safely and freely explore the issues in their lives that have led them to a life behind bars. Prisoners team up with outside individuals to serve as seasoned guides and emotional confidants as they dive headlong into meditative group work. This work includes lengthy breakout discussions full of painful retrospection, role playing scenarios allowing emotional access to places long hidden away, and sessions designed to coax out the physical release of emotions from deep within.

Capturing the therapeutic proceedings with patient attention to institutional process, THE WORK proves to be both a visceral depiction of the power of group therapy and an unfathomably tragic portrait of how countless lives are ruined by the ill-fated circumstances of their upbringings. What makes a murderer? THE WORK suggests it's nothing less than a loss of innocence.

## FILM THEMES

Lifelong inmates and curious outside volunteers participate in a four-day group therapy exercise at the Folsom State Prison in hopes of exorcising long-buried demons and learning things about themselves thought long lost.

### **RUINED AND FORGOTTEN LIVES**

Many of the men who reside within the walls of California's maximum security Folsom State Prison have no future in the world outside. They've committed heinous acts that have landed them behind bars for the remainder of their lives, stripping them of any semblance of humanity while separating them from whatever family might be willing to still claim them as their own. Locked away and isolated from modern civilization, these men not only suffer from guilt, but a serious lack of socialization.

### **HARDENED EXTERIORS, SOFT INTERIORS**

Hardened criminals covered in ragged tattoos usually project an appearance of emotional unknowability. Like Dark Cloud, a longtime member of the Native American Brotherhood, or Rick, a former member of the white supremacist group the Aryan Brotherhood, most of these long-term inmates are nothing short of physically intimidating and have a history of violence. Yet, the four-day group therapy retreat in which they participate reveals each man to possess surprising emotional depth and a startling sense of communal humanity.

### **HISTORIES COME BACK TO HAUNT**

Both inmates and those from outside the prison walls, according to the Inside Circle Foundation's mission statement, "explore the issues in their lives that have prevented them from living up to their full potential as human beings." During the process, each of them realize that nearly all of their lives' major follies stem from faults in their upbringings. Damage done to their psyches as children has left an unimaginable impact on their understanding of their adult selves.

### **CATHARSIS IN THERAPY**

As a group, the inmates and outsiders work through personal feelings and painful memories via discussions, role playing, creative outlets, and outbursts of physical unburdening that resemble some sort of collective exorcisms. Each conversation and activity brings another person to that terrifying emotional precipice, revealing a part of themselves they've long hidden away and thought lost forever. The flowing tears prove that these broken and searching men share an immense depth of feeling—of regret, forgiveness, longing, hopelessness, brotherhood, trust—and above all, a sense of long-lost innocence that was likely stripped from them before they could make sense of their future potential.

**“Well, I’m stuck in Folsom Prison and time keeps dragging on.”**

Johnny Cash, “Folsom Prison Blues”

**“This whole process of going down into the wound is not an end in itself, we’re looking for something and we’re bringing something back out of that descent.”**

Unnamed Folsom Prison Counselor



## FILM FACTS:

- Jairus McLeary and Gethin Aldous's *THE WORK* had its world premiere at the 2017 South By Southwest Film Festival in Austin, Texas, where it won the SXSW Grand Jury Award for Best Documentary. The film went on to have an incredibly successful run on the international festival circuit, screening at IDFA, BAMcinemaFest, Busan International Film Festival, and Sheffield Doc/Fest, where it was honored with the Audience Award.
- Brian, Charles, Chris, Dark Cloud, Kiki, and Vegas, all featured in *THE WORK*, were recognized by the prestigious [Cinema Eye Honors](#) for The Unforgettables, "which annually celebrates the exciting and sometimes tricky collaborations between filmmaker and subjects by noting those indelible individuals who helped define documentary cinema in 2017."
- The events depicted in *THE WORK* took place in California's Folsom State Prison, a maximum security penitentiary that opened back in 1880. It has served as the home to famous criminals like Charles Manson and Suge Knight, played host to Johnny Cash's famed jailhouse performances, and has been the execution location of 93 condemned prisoners.
- The prison outreach program depicted in *THE WORK* is run by the [Inside Circle Foundation](#) (ICF), a nonprofit organization dedicated to the inner personal growth of men in prison. Having extensive experience facilitating men's groups within prisons as a volunteer educator, Rob Allbee founded the ICF in January of 1999 with the goal of helping men achieve the inner development necessary to become healthy contributing members of our society.
- The Inside Circle Foundation focuses on reducing prison violence, lowering recidivism, and guiding inmates through healing that allows for meaningful lives after release.
- According to the Inside Circle Foundation's [website](#), "The founders of ICF have been working with inmates and establishing weekly support groups within Folsom Prison since 1997. There are currently over 100 inmates participating in groups inside several California prisons. In addition to the weekly meetings, ICF conducts several four-day intensives each year. While these numbers are encouraging, bear in mind that there are approximately 160,000 inmates in 33 prisons in California's prison-industrial complex."

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Donate** to the Inside Circle Foundation, a group that strives "to create environments in which prisoners can work and explore the issues in their lives that have prevented them from living up to their full potential as human beings," as seen in *THE WORK*.
2. **Write** a prison inmate. Receiving letters can be a great way to lift an inmate's spirits and keep them hopeful while they are serving time.
3. **Volunteer** at a local prison. Therapeutic programs like the one featured in *THE WORK* are often volunteer run, and there is always a need for educational tutors. Programs like Princeton's [Petey Greene Program](#) helps facilitate prison volunteer opportunities.
4. **Support** organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union with its [National Prison Project](#) to defend and preserve the rights of prisoners, or [Amnesty International](#) which defends prisoners and detainees according to the rights and standards of international human rights law despite where you are, or what you may have done.

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They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

**Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.**