

# INFLUENCE | FILM CLUB

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## Step Discussion Guide

Director: Amanda Lipitz

Year: 2017

Time: 84 min

**You might know this director from:**

STEP is Amanda Lipitz's first feature-length documentary film.

## FILM SUMMARY

What is step you ask? "Step is life," says Blessin Giraldo, captain of Baltimore's Lethal Ladies step team. Riding the line between choreographed dance, musical performance, and oral storytelling, step for young people across the United States is both a safe haven from the stresses of home and the streets, and a vibrant creative outlet for self expression. But STEP, Amanda Lipitz's powerful feature debut, is much more than just a tribute to the power of dance, it reveals step, and the strong women who help organize it, to be powerful forces for positive change in the lives of young people.

The film follows Blessin and fellow senior step team members Cori Grainger and Tayla Solomon over the course of their final year at the Baltimore Leadership School for Young Girls, an all girls, college preparatory public charter school. Each of them have come to rely on step as an escape from the turmoil of their households (occasional power shutoffs, no food in the fridge), the stresses of school (each of them are in the throes of applying for college), and the echoes of racial inequality that still haunt Baltimore (especially in the wake of Freddie Gray's death and the resulting riots). They pour their hearts into their new Black Lives Matter-themed routine in hopes of taking home the top prize at a regional step competition, while struggling to become the first in their families to attend college.

Structured around the lead up to this competition, STEP is much more than a dance film. It beautifully portrays the power of dance while painting a broader, more intimate portrait of a community trying its very best to overcome the inherited burdens of poverty and racial injustice by investing in education. And what a bright future these young women have!

## FILM THEMES

When there was no power at home, no food in the cupboards, and black bodies dying in the streets just blocks away, Baltimore's Lethal Ladies step team became a safe place for struggling young women to come together and express themselves with great power and pride.

### THE ART OF STEP

One part dance, one part percussion, one part storytelling—stepping is an increasingly popular modern form of art that calls back to ancient traditions. Like so many artistically talented teens, these Baltimore teens embrace their chosen medium both as a fluid means of self expression and as an escape from their struggles at home and school. With rigorously choreographed movements, their bodies create complex rhythms and project an effortless confidence, while their voices convey anxieties about the state of their communities and the world at large. Elegant and empowering, step is here to stay.

### A POVERTY-STRICKEN CITY

It's no secret that Baltimore has a long-standing problem with poverty. According to the latest [United States census](#), 22.7% of the city's population lives under the poverty line, while the [Baltimore City Public School system](#) reports that 64.7% of its student body come from low-income families who qualify for federal assistance programs. Just a few blocks west of the Baltimore Leadership School for Young Women is the city's Sandtown-Winchester & Harlem Park district where 51.8% of those ages 16-64 were unemployed between 2008 and 2012 according to the [Justice Policy Institute](#). Unfortunately, this means that even bright and talented teens like Cori or Blessin have to occasionally get along without power at home or without food in the fridge for days at a time.

### BLACK LIVES MATTER

Baltimore's Lethal Ladies step team is populated wholly by young African American women and, as it happens, their school is within walking distance of where Freddie Gray was arrested before being beaten to death by Baltimore police, as well as the riots that erupted in its wake. With these facts in mind, it should come as no surprise that when discussing a theme for their competition performance, the Lethal Ladies immediately decide on "Black Lives Matter" and incorporate the movement's rallying cry "Hands Up! Don't Shoot!" among other urgent signage into their performance.

### SUPPORT SYSTEMS ARE CRITICAL

Sometimes family is not enough. STEP shows that without the love and support of fellow step team members and coaches, as well as school teachers and guidance counsellors who go above and beyond to advocate for their students well-being and worth, these young women might fall victim to the cycle of poverty that has haunted Baltimore for decades. Lucky for them, they've managed to cultivate a support system that has helped to promise them brighter futures. Thanks to their support systems, their futures are not limited by the financial struggles of their past. What's next for these bright young women?

**"Step is life."**

Blessin Giraldo

**"I didn't know step, but I do know musicals and I was blown away. For me, it was what happens in a great musical: when a character can't speak anymore, they sing."**

Amanda Lipitz



## FILM FACTS:

- STEP had its world premiere at the 2017 Sundance Film Festival, where it won a Special Jury Prize for inspiration filmmaking. The film went on to screen at a lengthy list of prestigious film festivals around the world including True/False, Sheffield Doc/Fest, and the AFI Doc Festival, where it won the Audience Award.
- Shortly after its world premiere, [Deadline](#) reported, “Fox Searchlight has acquired world rights for north of \$4 million for STEP, a documentary that drew bidders like few docs do. Fox Searchlight not only bought the doc for distribution, but for remake rights as well.” Unfortunately, [Box Office Mojo](#) shows that the film made about \$1.1 Million on its U.S. theatrical release.
- According to the [Baltimore Sun](#), all three leading ladies featured in STEP have been successful in their first year of college. Blessin Giraldo completed her freshman year at Coppin State University, majoring in business marketing, with a double minor in graphic design and communications. Cori Grainger completed her freshman year at the Johns Hopkins University, studying computer science and international studies, with a minor in Spanish. Tayla Solomon completed her freshman year at Alabama A&M University, studying urban planning with a minor in political science.
- The [Baltimore Leadership School for Young Girls](#) is an all girls, college preparatory public charter school serving young women residing in Baltimore. On average, more than 95% of the school’s students graduate high school and go on to attend college. The senior class featured in STEP graduated with 100% of its students set to attend college the following year.
- Following her appearance in STEP, Blessin Giraldo [auditioned](#) for the 14th season of Fox’s reality dance competition show “So You Think You Can Dance.” The judges moved her into the preliminary choreography round, but was later cut when she couldn’t quite keep up with Mandy Moore’s choreography.
- Prior to becoming a documentary film director, Amanda Lipitz was a successful Broadway producer, working on such productions as the Tony Award-winning play “The Humans” and the “Legally Blonde” musical. She stumbled into filmmaking when asked by her alma mater, New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts, to make a short film to help them raise money for scholarships. From there she began making short films about girls’ education and students who were the first in their families to go to college.

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Donate** to the [Baltimore Leadership School for Young Women](#), the charter school featured in STEP that helped 100% of its graduating class attend college.
2. **Join** a local step team or start your own! This [helpful guide](#) will help you get one started at your own school.
3. **Find** a local chapter of [Black Lives Matter](#) and take action. Your support helps ensure every person of color has the social, economic, and political power to thrive.
4. **Advocate** to end hunger. Make sure your local policy makers support federal food assistance programs that ensure aid to hungry families in need. See [Feeding America](#)’s comprehensive list of programs for details.

## We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

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.**