AMERICAN REFUGEES
Four animated short films about real families, homelessness & resilience.

A Discussion Guide

Created by Seattle University Project on Family Homelessness

su-familyhomelessness.org
AmericanRefugees.org
@SUFilmProject
#SUFH
DISCUSSION GUIDE OVERVIEW

Watching the “American Refugees” films can be a powerful experience, but talking about them with others is the next step in creating change! This guide will help you generate conversation about family homelessness and find ways to be part of the solution.

All four animated short films created for this project are available at www.AmericanRefugees.org.
Total running time: **about 17 minutes**  
Running time for each film: **about 4 minutes**

HOW TO HOST A FILM SCREENING FOR THE “AMERICAN REFUGEES” SHORTS

You can host a screening party and/or group discussion almost anywhere. Watch the films all together, or split them up and view them over a series of gatherings.

- At your church or school  
- In your living room or back yard  
- In a community center  
- At your organization’s meeting

TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL SCREENING

1. **Localize It.** Find a way to connect the films to what’s happening in your community. Invite a speaker, such as a leader from your 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness, a nonprofit organization, or someone who has experienced family homelessness who can share what is happening locally.

2. **Prep in Advance.** Test the equipment beforehand and make sure that the films work on your Internet connection, computer and projector. Cue the films up before your guests arrive. Test the sound level on the films and any microphones, and make sure everyone will be able to hear.

3. **Get the Conversation Going.** Use discussion questions, such as those on the next four pages, to guide the conversation. Or use the warm-up questions below. Sometimes it’s better to break into groups and encourage in-depth conversation, rather than allowing only a few questions from a large group. Ask participants to use social media to react to the film during the event.

4. **Turn Awareness Into Action.** After watching films like these, people often feel mobilized to act. Don’t lose that momentum! You can prepare a handout with a list of action steps, ask them to sign a pledge card and, most importantly, follow up with them later to keep the energy going.

WARM-UP QUESTIONS FOR YOUR GROUP

1. Besides homelessness, what themes tie all these films together?

2. How does the animation in these films affect how you feel about the story?

3. What are the coping mechanisms that these families use to deal with homelessness?

4. These stories all came from the experiences of families in Washington state. How are they relevant to you in your community?

How a family moves out of homelessness with the help of a compassionate, supportive community.

Imagine seeing glimpses of the family who once lived in the foreclosed home you’re thinking of buying.

Fathers and children share their worries, feelings, challenges and how they overcome homelessness.

A teen in a homeless family describes his challenges and celebrates the triumph of his creative self.

*American Refugees* was produced through Seattle University’s Film & Family Homelessness Project, funded by a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.
ISSUES
As you view the film, note which of these issues arise and how they affect the story.

- Difficulty adjusting to having a home after homelessness
- Faith community support
- Families being split up for shelter
- Foreclosure
- Help from family & friends
- Helping others despite being homeless
- Job loss/Unemployment
- One-time vs. multiple episodes of homelessness
- Racism and racial inequity
- Resilience
- Safety net
- School disruption
- Shelters
- Single dads as heads of families
- Vehicle residency

Things You Can Do
1. Tell your family and friends to watch the film at www.americanrefugees.org.
2. Host your own viewing party or discussion group.
3. Use social media to share the link. #SUFH
4. Be Sure to Visit: projectonfamilyhomelessness.org for more action steps.

“THE SMITHS”
Director, Writer, Animator: Neely Goniodksy
Hand-drawn animation, digital cutouts and paintings tell this heartwarming story about how a family falls into homelessness, and then moves out of it with the help of a compassionate, supportive community.

“My brother said, ‘Look at what my bell can do!’”

DIRECTOR BIO
Neely Goniodsky has produced and directed 16 animated shorts; many have been screened throughout the world. Her work explores traditional animation techniques, cut-out collage and under-the-camera animation.

Compassion and understanding, through empathy and members of a supportive community, can reinforce feelings of dignity and self-worth in families who have lost everything.

—Neely Goniodsky

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
1. How does the bicycle bell symbolize hope for this family? Is there a childhood belonging you drew strength from?
2. Have you ever been asked for help by a friend or family member who’s having money problems? Who would you ask for help if you fell on hard times?
3. What do you think would have happened to this family if the Smiths had not helped them? If the shelter had been full? If the father hadn’t found a new job through a friend?
4. How do you think family homelessness affects the children in the family?

DID YOU KNOW...
Supportive communities can be the most important safety net for preventing and ending homelessness.

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“HOME FOR SALE”
Director and Writer: Laura Jean Cronin
Imagine seeing glimpses of the family who once lived in the foreclosed home you’re touring and thinking about buying. The power of this piece comes from its radio play nature and rich oil paintings that were physically layered to create the 30-plus animated images seen in the film.

“This could never happen to us.”

DIRECTOR BIO
Laura Jean Cronin is an award-winning filmmaker and the owner of Pound Pictures. Her short films have earned national attention, and her screenplay, Princess and Buddha, has won numerous honors. Cronin is a producer at Reel Grrls in Seattle.

Any of us could be one tragedy away from poverty and homelessness. Walking through the lives of the families who lost their homes had a strong impact on me...how close we all are to homelessness and how important efforts to end homelessness are.

– Laura Jean Cronin

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
1. Did you sympathize with the couple who lost their home? With the couple thinking of buying the home? Why or why not?
2. Does the idea of living in a foreclosed home bother you?
3. What kind of memories of your home life would an intuitive new owner be able to feel?
4. Is the feeling that “This could never happen to us” realistic for most people? Are there steps that people should take to build up a safety net?

DID YOU KNOW...
Millions of families lost their homes during the recession due to job loss and other economic factors. Many homeless parents are working, or seeking jobs.
American Refugees.org
#SUFH

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“SUPER DADS”

Director: Sihanouk Mariona
Using a kaleidoscope of real stories to create an overarching storyline, fathers and children share their worries, feelings, challenges and how they overcome being homeless, as portrayed by stop-motion animated clay characters.

“I really miss my mother...but I can deal with it...”

DIRECTOR BIO
Sihanouk Mariona is an Emmy award-winning stop-motion animator and co-founder of the Seattle animation studio Wonderful Lizard. His work includes animation for Robot Chicken seasons one through five, Robot Chicken Star Wars III and MTV’s Celebrity Death Match.

I believe that a gripping story joined with engaging visuals can go a great long way to help us relate to each other, understand that no one is immune from change in circumstance, and inspire all of us to take action.

– Sihanouk Mariona

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
1. What are the biggest differences in day-to-day life before and during homelessness for these families?

2. Do you think the children in this film realize the extent of how bad things are for their families? How will that affect them as they grow older?

3. If you were losing your home, how would you explain that to your child? Would you be very frank, or would you try to conceal as much as you could? How much should a child know about the family’s financial situation?

4. What are the challenges for a single father caring for his family, compared to those of a single mother, or are they the same?

DID YOU KNOW...
In many communities, shelters do not have enough room for families. Often, families must be split up due to shelter rules. Other than in domestic violence situations, keeping families together is usually the best approach.

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“THE BEAST INSIDE”
Amy Enser, Director; Drew Christie, Co-Director & Animator
As told through the power of spoken word rap and illustrated with hand-drawn animations and a muted warm color palette, a teen in a homeless family describes his challenges and celebrates the triumph of his creative self.

“As soon as I live in a house, it’s so difficult to sleep for me.”

DIRECTOR BIO
Amy Enser, creative director of Studio/216, is an award-winning filmmaker with extensive documentary and narrative film experience, including the Dinner Dialogues Documentary Series (2013 Bronze Telly Award winner) and Welcome to Doe Bay (SIFF’s 2012 “Best of Fest”).

Drew Christie is an animator, illustrator and filmmaker creating stories through hand-made images. His work has been featured in The New York Times, The Huffington Post, The Atlantic and many more.

“I have a unique perspective that helps me illustrate how similar, yet different we are from one another, and how a seemingly insignificant chain of events can lead to traumatic outcomes.

– Amy Enser

“I see animation as a tool to communicate complex ideas in a non-threatening way. I believe family homelessness is a tragic issue that must be dealt with in a sensitive way.

– Drew Christie

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
1. How does Tilawn’s rapping set the mood for the topic of this film?
2. What do you think the dragon in Tilawn’s story represents? What kind of beast do you deal with in your life?
3. Tilawn is from a small community in Washington state. Is the kind of homelessness he describes visible or hidden? Do you think homelessness is a problem even in a small town?
4. If you were hiring a worker, would you consider hiring someone who is homeless? What criteria would you take into account?

DID YOU KNOW...
Children who were homeless with their families can have a hard time breaking the cycle; many of them end up homeless as adults. Homelessness should be rare, brief and not repeated.