



Two Towns of JASPER

On June 7, 1998, in Jasper, Texas,

James Byrd Jr., a black man, was chained to a pickup truck and dragged to his death by three white men. Two film crews, one black and one white, set out to record the repercussions of this modern-day lynching by following the trials of the men charged with the crime.

Two Towns of Jasper was filmed in 1999 as Bill King, Lawrence Russell Brewer, and Shawn Berry were being tried for James Byrd's murder.

King and Brewer were sentenced to death. *Two Towns of Jasper* documents the reactions of the town's citizens and, along the way, uncovers a complex portrait of race, experience, and perspective.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Active Voice and the Television Race Initiative are funded in part by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and The James Irvine Foundation.

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Huff Creek Road, site of the 1998
dragging death of James Byrd Jr.
Photograph by Steven Miller

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Dear Viewer

The subject of race in America often feels like a coarse blanket. It itches, scratches, and even when we are not enveloped in it we still feel its presence.

On June 7, 1998, in Jasper, Texas, James Byrd Jr., an African American man, was brutally murdered — dragged behind a pickup truck until his body disintegrated and his head was severed from his body by a concrete drain culvert. Three white men were arrested, brought to trial and subsequently convicted of this heinous murder. The crime became the basis for our documentary film about race in America — *Two Towns of Jasper*.

We have known each other for more than 20 years. We have much in common— we went to private high schools, attended Ivy League universities, and are from Eastern cities in the United States. But despite our similarities, one distinct difference brought us together to make this film — our race. [Whitney is white and Marco is black.]

While many films examine the topic of race, *Two Towns of Jasper* documents the town of Jasper during the trials of the three men who murdered James Byrd Jr., and it records the lives of the town's black and white residents with segregated film crews. A black crew filmed only the black residents of the town; a white crew filmed only the white residents. In editing, we integrated the material into a single narrative.

Because race is never easy to talk about, either among those of the same race or across race, we chose to segregate our production in order to provide a framework for the black and white residents of the town to speak candidly about their views. We felt that it was essential to provide a context for sharing feelings rather than have people explain their attitudes. As several sequences in the film illustrate, blacks and whites often see the same situation quite differently. Understanding these differences can be a first step in bridging them.

The unflinching candor of the black and white residents of Jasper depicted in our film can provide a starting point for dialogue and reflection about race relations and racial difference. In the 25 screenings of the film that we've attended, the ensuing discussions have been powerful and poignant for all involved, helping them acknowledge, analyze and move beyond their personal and communal race histories.

As you watch this film, ask: What fences dividing my community need dismantling? Are there institutional structures that perpetuate the division? Do I have personal prejudices that need to be overcome? What actions can I take as an individual that will affect positive change? Bridging the racial divide requires commitment. Talking about race and confronting racism require individual as well as community action. Is your town *Two Towns*?

Sincerely,

Marco Williams and Whitney Dow



***Two Towns of Jasper* isn't a typical TV movie —**

something we watch to pass the time and then forget. The events it chronicles raise troubling issues that affect every community in the United States. So in addition to viewing, consider carving out time to ponder the film, either by yourself or with family and friends. This guide poses questions that can help you reflect on the issues, enhance your viewing experience, think more deeply about racism, and perhaps even inspire you to take action. After viewing, we invite you to visit the Web site www.twotownsofjasper.com and share your experience.

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“When Mr. Byrd was brutally murdered, blacks didn’t rage, we didn’t burn things, we didn’t go out and do an eye for an eye. You know it took this for us to prioritize some things around here.”

—Margena Gardiner



USING THE FILM TO DEEPEN THE UNDERSTANDING OF RACISM

General Questions

- What insights or new knowledge did you get from this film? What messages or lessons would you hope that others learn from this film?
- Before viewing: Jot down what you think the reaction of whites and of blacks will be to the murder of James Byrd and the trials of his killers. After viewing: Review your notes. Which of your ideas were confirmed? Which were contradicted? Did anything in the film surprise you?
- Does this film deepen your understanding of racism or prejudice? How does it contradict or confirm what you believe about people who hold racist views? What insights does the film provide to people whose exploration of racism goes beyond relations between blacks and whites?
- Immediately after viewing: Think of one or two words that describe what you feel. Did any particular scene, person, or comment stand out in your mind? Why that one? Which character in the film did you most identify with and why?
- What is the significance of the film’s title? Describe the reaction of each “town” to the murder and the trials. What accounts for the differences? In what ways are the actions and perceptions of individuals in the film influenced by their race, and in what ways are they influenced by other factors such as gender, generation, family relationships, or personality traits like how people deal with anger and grief?

FOR GROUPS

Before viewing the film, canvass the room to find out what people already know about the murder of James Byrd. Then ask participants: What context does your own experience provide for interpreting this event — what things have happened in your community or your life? After viewing: How did the context you described influence what you saw in the film?

Specific Scenes and Topics

- In the film, there are conflicting interpretations over symbols. Why are symbols important? How do they relate to racism in Jasper and in your own community? Consider the following examples:

"I think [James Byrd] oughtta be judged for the way he lived, not the way he died." — Freddie Warren

"The issue here is race, this racial killing, not [Byrd's] moral character or anything related to that." — Mylinda Washington

Do you think things should be named after James Byrd? What would that mean to the various people in the film? Why might it mean different things to different people?

"To a lot of young white boys, the rebel flag means just what it says: rebel, like 'I don't take no shit off nobody,' you know, 'I'm wild.' . . . And I'm sure a hell of a lot of those people didn't like black people at all, but a lot of 'em, it's just a, like you know, kick-ass. They didn't really associate it with what it is — part of the confederacy — but I mean, that's all in the past. . . . Blacks are taking it real personal, but I don't remember all these years them taking it personal. You know, maybe they did, they just never told us they did." — Mike Lout

Is it possible to divorce a symbol from its historical context? Do you think blacks really did remain silent, or is it possible that they just didn't share their perspective with Mike Lout or that he wasn't listening? Why might blacks have hesitated to share their views about the "rebel flag" with whites? What are the consequences of staying silent in the face of racism? What are the consequences of whites not listening or not actively seeking the opinions of blacks?

"We fought so hard to get that day [Martin Luther King holiday on the school calendar] and now you're gonna take it back. With Jasper being the way it is, and all the things that have happened, I don't think they're trying very hard to try to heal the city." — Rev. Ray Lewis

"I'll be honest with you, the Martin Luther King holiday doesn't do that much for me. But then again, I never had to sit in the back of the bus." — Mike Lout

What does the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday mean to you? Why did it mean different things to different people in Jasper?

- One beauty salon customer summarized her reaction to the murder: "You always will look over your shoulder, wondering if it happened once, it can happen again." Do you think the murder had the same effect on whites in Jasper? How does a single act of violence serve to threaten an entire community?

Part of Shawn Berry's defense was that he was a bystander, not an instigator. The jury did not believe that claim, but assuming that such a situation could occur, what is the responsibility of an observer of an act of racism? Should bystanders who don't intervene be held culpable in any way? How might the responsibility to respond be different for blacks and whites? Racist acts can range from extreme violence to a thoughtless comment or joke. Have you ever witnessed any act of racism? What did you do? If the event happened today, would your response be the same? If not, what has changed?



KJAS Radio owner/
reporter Mike Lout in
the press room during
the Shawn Allen Berry
murder trial

**According to the U.S. Census,
Jasper's 8,247 residents
are approximately
48% white and 44% black,
and the remainder are
Latino, Asian, Native
American, or belong to
multiple racial groups.**

Marco Williams, left,
and director of
photography Jonathan
Weaver with Reverend
Ray Lewis, right





Jasper resident
Trent Smith and his
family at their home

Do you think life in Jasper changed after the trials? If so, how? Consider the following comments:

"I've changed my views partially. . . . I don't want to have anything to do with the Aryan Circle, the Aryan Brotherhood, or the gangs. . . . Bottom line is that you've got to treat people, all people, the way you want to be treated, know what I mean? That's what I do now. I used to not do that."

— Trent Smith

"The black community and the white community have made very real efforts to speak to one another perhaps more than we ever did, to make eye contact, to be more concerned, I think, than we ever were before. And I think that's been having an impact."

— Father Ron Fosage

"We can't change a white man's heart, how they feel and think about us. We can expose it, like we did with Bill King. . . but you can't necessarily change it. You live with it."

— Walter Diggles

ASSESSING YOUR COMMUNITY AND TAKING ACTION

The murder of James Byrd forced the citizens of Jasper to examine themselves and their town. By allowing us to look at their experience, *Two Towns of Jasper* provides an opportunity to examine our own communities. The questions in this section are designed to help you move from reflection or discussion to action. Taking small steps in one's own neighborhood can combat feelings of helplessness in the face of what can seem like an overwhelming and intractable problem.

FOR GROUPS

Before discussing any of the questions below, take a few moments to define "community." The group can choose any definition it finds appropriate — an entire city, a neighborhood, an ethnic, racial, or religious group — as long as everyone agrees on what they mean when they use the term in this discussion.

No group is likely to have time to address every question in this section, so select those that will help your group members see their own community more clearly. Keep in mind that the goal is not to agree on a singular picture. As we see in the film, people can view the same community very differently. Encourage people to learn about their community by listening to others' perspectives. To spark creativity, help the group brainstorm possible actions before making specific plans.

- What are the demographics of your community? How is it like or unlike Jasper? Through the course of the film, viewers see varied expressions of racism, from extreme white supremacy to mundane stereotyping. What forms of racism are present in your community right now? Have the forms of racism changed over time? What actions can you take to diminish the instances of racism you have identified?
- What were the causes in Jasper that led to this crime? Do you think something similar to the murder of James Byrd could happen in your community? What kinds of things make it likely or unlikely that such a crime could take place where you live? What can you do to decrease the likelihood of it happening? One black woman in the film observes, "Jasper has a lot of skeletons." Are there "skeletons" in your community? Have hate crimes happened in your community? If so, how did you respond? How did your community respond?

- In Jasper, the fence dividing the town cemetery into black and white sections symbolized divisions in the community at large. Do similar symbols exist in your community? Would it make a difference to dismantle them? If so, how might you begin that process?
- Are the attitudes of people in the film similar to attitudes in your own community? If so, would viewers of this film therefore come away knowing more about you and your community? Is there any way in which viewers might be misled about you or your community?
- The film is shot in some of Jasper's gathering places — the beauty salon, the Bell-Jim Hotel, the church — most of them segregated by race. What are the gathering places in your community? Are they segregated or integrated? Are there places in your community where people from different groups can gather comfortably? If not, might you be able to create such a space? Should all spaces be integrated, or is it appropriate for a community to have some segregated spaces?
- *Two Towns of Jasper's* camera lens allows blacks to "sit in" on conversations between whites and vice versa, giving both groups an opportunity to get to know each other a little better. What do you know about the perspectives and experiences of people in your community whose ethnicity, race, or religion are different from yours? Are there people who cross between groups? Where does your information about people different from you come from? Are you satisfied that this information is complete and accurate? What kinds of sources would provide others with the most accurate information about you? What can you do to support or promote accurate information sources in your community?
- After one of the verdicts, the victorious prosecutor observes that race relations have come a long way: "There was a time when cops ignored facts," he said. What is the history of blacks in the justice system in your community? Has justice in your community "come a long way"? Can you think of any specific examples?
- In the film, we see people coming together in worship. What role do the religious institutions in your community play in either bringing people together or keeping them divided? If you are affiliated with a religious institution, what role do you think it plays? What can you do to shape that role?
- Contemplating the guilty verdict and sentence of one of Jasper's hometown sons, a resident observes, "When you know someone, you want to cut him slack." Are you more likely to "cut slack" to people you know, people who look like you, or share your religion, or live in your neighborhood? When you know someone it's harder to hate or stereotype them. How do we get to know people who are different from us? Are there ways that you can help people from different groups meet and spend time with one another?
- If you had the power to make *Two Towns of Jasper* required viewing for some people in your town, city, or community, who would be on your list? How might you arrange a screening for the people on your list?
- The final line of the film is "Coming together, that's what we need." How do we do that? How might you create a place in your community where people can "come together"?



Jasper County Sheriff
Billy Rowles

USING THE FILM TO EXPLORE MEDIA LITERACY

To make *Two Towns of Jasper*, a black film crew documented the black community and a white film crew was assigned to cover the white community. To get a sense of what difference the race of a film crew might make, try the following activity:

Think of an event in your life — a first date, getting a speeding ticket, having a job interview. Then pick three or four people to whom you might describe that event. Choose people who differ in age, profession, and relationship to you, such as your child, mother, boss, roommate, or significant other. Imagine telling each person about the event. If time allows, work with a partner and actually assign them an identity and tell the story. Then switch partners and repeat the process, but assign the new partner a different identity. How does the story change as you tell it to different people? Do you use the same language with your grandchild as with your best friend? Do you share the same details with your neighbor that you do with your pastor, rabbi, or imam?

After the exercise, think about how our audience changes the way we talk, what we share, what feels safe. How does the race of the person hearing our story influence how and what we share? How do you think it influenced what people in the film said? What did you learn from the film about perspective?

To further explore the role of media, consider:

- How did the filmmakers' choices about where to film make you feel? Would you feel comfortable going into places like the diner or beauty salon in person? If not, how did it feel to be taken there through the lens of the camera?
- As people tell stories, listen for when they use modifiers (like "black" or "white") and when they leave them out. How does use of modifiers make some groups the "norm" and marginalize other groups? When you hear sentences without modifiers, e.g., "There were three guys sitting on the porch. . .", what image comes to your mind? What race are the "guys"?
- The media coverage of the Byrd murder made it difficult for people in East Texas to deny the existence of racism in their community. What does this suggest about media's role in challenging racism or keeping the status quo?



Family members of James Byrd Jr. place a wreath at his grave following the Berry verdict.

FACILITATING A GROUP DISCUSSION

In addition to providing an opportunity for individual reflection, *Two Towns of Jasper* can serve as a springboard to increase and deepen communities' awareness of race relations and racism, prompt dialogue, and inspire action. A facilitator, using the strategies outlined below, can play a key role in helping people move along that continuum.

The guide's questions can help with preparation, or as sparks to get a dialogue started, or to help people deepen their thinking, but keep in mind that this is not a textbook. No one is expected to cover all the material in these pages, nor do you need to use discussion prompts in any particular order. Questions are designed for varied audiences and situations; skip over any that seem inappropriate for your event. Let the interests and concerns of your group dictate the flow of the discussion.

There are several ways to incorporate *Two Towns of Jasper* into a public event. You can screen the whole film and then begin your dialogue, or you can view it in segments. For example, you might pause for discussion after the verdict in each trial. Or you might ask people to view the film at home before they come to your event. Whatever you choose, know that spaces in which it is safe to discuss racism are rare. By providing such a space you are giving your community a precious gift.

To the Facilitator

Talking about racism is hard. An experienced facilitator can help ensure that the conversation is productive and rewarding without asking people to hide feelings of pain, discomfort, or frustration.

The facilitator's primary job is to establish an encouraging tone that allows people to explore sensitive issues. Your ability to remain calm and neutral, keep people on track, help the group move toward action, and model appropriate interaction will contribute significantly to the success of your event and the longevity of its impact.

It is important for a facilitator to be involved in planning an event, but it may be difficult to assume the role of host or teacher and also serve as facilitator. In the best circumstances, facilitators remain neutral, focusing on helping others be heard rather than sharing their own perspectives. Unlike a teacher, a facilitator enters the discussion only when needed to help move things forward. Be sure your role in the event is clear.

Planning for Your Event

As you think about how to create a safe environment that welcomes open, respectful participation, consider the following:

Is the event being held in a space where all participants will feel equally comfortable? If possible, convene your event in a neutral place, easily accessible to people who live in different neighborhoods. Sites such as your PBS station, a library, a community college auditorium may be able to serve as a neutral location.

How can you ensure everyone an opportunity to be heard? If the group is large, are there plans to break into small groups or partners, or should attendance be limited? Is the room set up so that people can see and hear one another easily? If you are working with immigrant communities, do you need to provide translators?

Have you structured the event to leave enough time for planning future action? For some people, just speaking publicly about racism is an important action step. But if everything stops at the walls of the room you're in, lasting impact will be limited. Planning next steps helps people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even when the discussion has been difficult.

'Bubbas' Ronnie Woods, left, and Harry Scheibe, right, on the porch of the Belle-Jim Hotel



Jasper resident Ethel Parks in front of the Jasper County Courthouse

Who will your event partners be? There are a variety of appropriate partners for a discussion of *Two Towns of Jasper*. You can start your search with the organizations listed in this guide's resource section.

Be knowledgeable. You need not be an expert on racism to facilitate a discussion, but the more you know, the more effective you will be at helping the group consider deeper issues. Listings in the Resources sidebar on page 11 of this guide can help you prepare.

Know your group. Race relations play out differently in different parts of the country, in rural and urban settings, and for different generations. Think about how those differences are reflected in language, comfort level in public discussions, and prior experience with issues of diversity. Structure your event accordingly.

Consider working with a co-facilitator. Because racism raises complex, sensitive, difficult issues, we recommend that discussions of *Two Towns of Jasper* be led by a facilitator who is knowledgeable about race relations or diversity issues. If you are leading a dialogue with an interracial audience, you probably will find it helpful to have a second facilitator — one of you black and one white. This strategy can broaden perspectives and increase perception. One facilitator may pick up signals from group members that the other facilitator misses.

Have you identified your own "hot button" issues? Substantive discussions about race and racism can trigger intense feelings in ourselves as well as in others. As a facilitator, you may end up being a target or lightning rod for the feelings of people in the room, so give yourself some time to reflect on the issues in the film before your event. That way you are not processing your own emotions and trying to facilitate a discussion at the same time. Before your event, plan how you will respond to possibly offensive comments to avoid having the dialogue shut down or escalate into an argument. Preparation is the key to keeping discussions calm, respectful, and productive.



Mary Verrett, sister of James Byrd Jr., speaks with the press on the day of the Berry verdict

At the Event

The strategies below can help you create an atmosphere that encourages people to share their experiences and insights in respectful and productive ways.

BEFORE THE DIALOGUE STARTS

Set ground rules. You might involve group members in this process by asking people what rules would help them feel safe enough to participate openly. You'll need strategies for how people will take turns or indicate that they want to speak, and how you will prevent one or two people from dominating the discussion.

You'll also need guidelines for the way people express themselves: No one may interrupt someone who is speaking; no one may use a "put down" or "slur"; yelling is off limits; people may speak for themselves ("I think. . .") but may not generalize for others ("everyone agrees that. . .").

Talk about the difference between "dialogue" and "debate." In a debate, participants try to convince others that they are right. In a dialogue, participants try to understand each other and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and actively listening to each other.

Be clear about the purpose of the event. Discussions can veer off course for many reasons, including the participants' desire to shift to more comfortable topics. For example, in discussing *Two Towns of Jasper*, it would be easy to drift into a debate about the death penalty. That might be appropriate, but it also might be a way to avoid discussing racism. To keep the group on track, make sure that everyone in the room understands the goals of the event.

Set realistic goals for your event based on your group's experience and ability. For some people, a candid conversation about race is a major step. Others have engaged in the conversation so often that they are tired of talking. The first group might not be able to do more than engage in dialogue. The latter group can be challenged to action: "What does that next step look like to you?" For both groups, it's important to applaud their willingness to deal with issues most people choose to avoid.

DURING THE DIALOGUE

Take care of yourself and group members. Discussing racism can open deep wounds. When the intensity level rises, pause to let everyone take a deep breath. Similarly, you might plan a moment immediately after viewing the film to allow participants to silently process what they've seen before beginning any discussion.

You might also consider providing safe space to "vent" by having segregated screenings or beginning the discussion in segregated groups before engaging in interracial dialogue. If you choose this strategy, be sure to provide options for people who are biracial, multiracial, or neither black nor white.

Humanize the "other." The film makes it clear that, in some respects, whites and blacks live in very different worlds. Without dismissing or diminishing those differences, you can help each participant identify something that they have in common with at least one other person from a group that they don't normally interact with. Finding simple common ground can begin the process of breaking through stereotypes. Common interests might include having kids the same age, sharing a hobby, rooting for the same sports team, serving in the military, or even something as simple as loving cats or chocolate ice cream.

Value people's good intentions. Using examples from the film, remind participants that perceptions and opinions can change over time and that individuals can hold contradictory views. For example, people may genuinely believe that racism is wrong but not translate that belief into objecting when their local school district removes Martin Luther King Day from the school holiday calendar. Encourage people to appreciate the efforts of others in the room to overcome racism and gently challenge one another in areas where understanding could be deeper. Acknowledge that our understanding is always incomplete — just think about the insights you now have that you lacked when younger. If we wait for individuals to prove that they hold all the "right" views before agreeing to engage in dialogue, we'll never start the conversation.

Extend the dialogue beyond black and white. When it comes to discussions of diversity or prejudice, the legacy of slavery in the United States has produced an understandable focus on relations between blacks and whites. Looking at privilege rather than race can help expand the discussion so that it involves everyone, not just blacks and whites.

RESOURCES

Active Voice
www.activevoice.net

Amnesty International
www.amnestyusa.org

City of Jasper
www.jaspertx.org

Facing History and Ourselves
www.facing.org

ITVS
www.itvs.org

Jasper & Deep East Texas
www.jasper-web.com

KJAS Radio-Jasper news
www.kjas.com

National Coalition Building Institute
www.ncbi.org

National Conference for
Community and Justice
www.nccj.org

PBS Home Video
www.shop.pbs.org

P.O.V.
www.pov.org

Two Towns of Jasper
www.twotownsofjasper.com

Working Films
www.workingfilms.org

Death in Texas
by Dina Temple-Raston,
Henry Holt and Company

*Hate Crime: The Story of
a Dragging in Jasper, Texas*,
by Joyce King,
Pantheon Books

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Two Towns of Jasper is part of the Active Voice/Television Race Initiative (TRI) pipeline. Active Voice is a nonprofit, fee-based service provider whose work is an outgrowth of promising practices developed by TRI. Active Voice (AV) creates campaigns for its clients — producers, stations and foundations — based on powerful issue-driven films. AV campaigns encourage individuals and community groups to probe, discuss and take action on timely and relevant social justice issues. In collaboration with a wide range of partners, Active Voice creates companion materials and trains facilitators in how to use the films as catalysts for civic engagement, volunteerism and coalition building. AV works with clients to assess community awareness, recruit partners, develop evaluation tools, raise funds and plan long-term distribution.

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Two Towns of Jasper will have its national broadcast premiere 9 pm, January 22, 2003 (check local listings), on PBS' acclaimed showcase for independent non-fiction film, P.O.V. (a cinematic term for "point of view"). A laboratory for television's potential, P.O.V. amplifies broadcasts by pioneering media innovation, interaction and impact through a wide range of energetic broadcast-related activities including Talking Back: Video and Digital Letters to P.O.V., P.O.V. Interactive and Community Engagement activities. For more information about this film and additional resources, visit our *Two Towns of Jasper* Web site at www.pbs.org/pov.

Funding and
Special Thanks

Two Towns of Jasper is produced in association with the Independent Television Service (www.itvs.org) and the National Black Programming Consortium with funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

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For more than 10 years, ITVS has fulfilled its mission of bringing powerful new voices to public television through its independent productions and national outreach efforts. In 1996, ITVS launched the Community Connections Project (CCP) to maximize the use of media as a tool for civic engagement and community development. The CCP collaborates with local field organizers, national and community-based organizations and public television stations to foster dialogue, develop lasting partnerships and implement positive action.



The National Black Programming Consortium, a nonprofit media service organization devoted to the preservation, production, distribution and promotion of diverse film and videos about African Americans and the experiences of the African diaspora.



To purchase or rent the *Two Towns of Jasper*:
<http://shop.pbs.org/products/AMDO1512>

TV
DOCUMENTARY