

POV Community Engagement & Education

DISCUSSION GUIDE



Team Meryland
a film by Gabriel Gaurano

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TEAM MERYLAND

In the projects of Watts, Meryland Gonzales, a twelve-year-old female boxer trains to be crowned the 2019 Junior Olympics champion after losing at the 2018 competition all while reliving a past medical trauma that forces her to fight for her life. Meanwhile, her parents, immigrants from Michoacán, Mexico work tirelessly to give their miracle child a shot at achieving her dreams.

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This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and designed for people who want to use *Team Maryland* to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit <https://communitynetwork.amdoc.org/>.

LETTER FROM THE FILMMAKER

I made *Team Meryland* because I truly believe in the power of family and the miracle of second chances. I grew up the youngest of seven kids in a tight-knit Filipino family raised by a single mom. Throughout my own journey, I've learned the strength of my siblings, the sacrifices my mom made for us, and our teamwork as a family to get a miraculous second chance. When I met the Gonzalez family and learned of their story, I knew immediately that this was a narrative I needed to champion. It's a story I wish my family and I had seen when we were looking for hope.

The family's ability to fight together through hardship spoke to my core. *Team Meryland* is a portrait of a young girl from Watts, South LA with a second chance to achieve greatness through boxing. Despite suffering from a severe medical trauma, growing up in a tough area of South LA, and being a first generation American, Meryland never gives up on her dreams, truly embodying the image of a "rose emerging from the concrete" as her father so eloquently describes her.

After a year-and-a-half of filming and another year of post-production, it is a privilege that my team and I share this film with you today. Living through the hardships of 2020 and 2021 which have broken many of us, I now realize that this goes beyond a film for my family. It's a story the world needs to hear. We hope the Gonzalez family shows us how to heal, find joy, and get back in the ring with loved ones in your corner. There isn't a better time like today to fight for your dreams.

Gabriel Gaurano, Director Cinematographer & Editor, *Team Meryland*

KEY PARTICIPANTS

- Meryland Gonzalez - A 12-year-old female boxer who qualifies and competes in the Junior Olympics after recovering from a debilitating illness at the age of six.
- Jorge Gonzalez - Meryland's father
- Araceli Gonzalez - Meryland's mother

KEY ISSUES

Team Meryland is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people who want to explore the following topics:

- Youth leadership
- Women in sports
- Pursuing dreams
- Immigrant experiences
- Second chances
- Power of family
- Sacrifice
- Resilience
- Faith
- Passion

BACKGROUND INFORMATION**Watts Neighborhood**

The neighborhood of Watts is located in South Los Angeles. In the 1940s, Watts transformed into a working-class African-American neighborhood when thousands of migrants left segregated states for California. By the early 1960s, whites in the area fled to new suburbs outside of the central city, and industrial jobs disappeared, leaving Watts in economic and racial isolation.

In August 1965, Marquette Frye, a young African American motorist, was pulled over and arrested by a Los Angeles police officer. The outbreak of violence that followed Frye's arrest touched off a larger-scale riot centered in the commercial section of Watts. The Watts riots lasted for six days, and led to wide-scale destruction, injuries, and deaths. In the late 1970s and 1980s, the drug epidemic hit the country and Watts saw a significant increase in gang related violence. In 1992, the L.A. riots erupted after the four Los Angeles policemen who beat Rodney King were acquitted. The day before the riots, rival gang leaders formalized a truce in response to decades of policing and systemic injustice. The terms of the peace agreement called for investments from local authorities to rebuild the community. Since then, the truce has had a measurable impact on reducing the number of gang related crimes.

Currently the racial demographics of Watts has shifted to more than 70 percent Latino. The increase shapes Watts's current social and political landscape, as Latinos advocate for greater civic participation alongside black leaders. Today, cross-racial coalitions continue working towards the empowerment of the Watts community.

Women's Amateur Boxing

In 1888, Olympic-style boxing became an organized sport in the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU). The sport's popularity spread worldwide and was included for the first time in the International Olympic Games in 1904. Since then, United States boxers have won 111 Olympic medals, leading the all-time medal count in the world.

At first, women were not included in the sport. In the 1904 Olympics, women's boxing was only a display event and not an actual competition. It wasn't until the 1970s that women who trained seriously for the ring were acknowledged, but they had a difficult time gaining acceptance by the boxing establishment. Since women did not have the right to compete in amateur matches, gender discrimination lawsuits helped to facilitate the rise of women's boxing. In 1993, USA Boxing lifted its ban and sanctioned amateur boxing for women.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

It wasn't until the 2012 Olympic Games in London that women's boxing became an official Olympic sport. The resilience, perseverance, and determination throughout this history has opened doors of opportunity for women boxers and athletes.

Mexican Immigration in California

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Mexicans immigrated to California in large numbers to escape the violence of the Mexican Revolution. Despite changes to U.S. immigration policies since then, the demand for labor in the U.S. fueled Mexican immigration.

These immigrants became the backbone of California's workforce, and they established permanent Mexican neighborhoods, referred to as barrios in urban areas and colonias in rural areas. These neighborhoods created communities through the development of churches, organizations, sports teams and activities, and businesses.

In the 1960s, a radicalized Mexican-American movement, called the Chicano Movement or El Movimiento, advocated for social and political empowerment. Mexican-Americans had endured decades of discrimination in the U.S., and leaders in the movement pushed for labor rights, education reform, and the restoration of land grants that were denied by the U.S. government. Youth activism was also a critical component of the movement, and included groups like student protestors at high schools and colleges demanding educational equity and cultural recognition. The movement gave rise to increased political representation in future decades, and also generated a cultural renaissance. Other Spanish-speaking immigrants have joined Mexican Americans in California, making Latinos the largest ethnic group in California.

Today, foreign-born immigrants including naturalized U.S. citizens (more than half), refugees, and lawful permanent residents are an integral part of the fabric of California. They account for over one-quarter of California's population and comprise a third of the entire labor force. Immigrants are neighbors, business owners, taxpayers, and workers. They are an integral part of California's diverse communities and make immeasurable contributions that benefit all.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**STARTING THE CONVERSATION**

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. You could pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion. Alternatively, you could ask participants to share their thoughts with a partner before starting a group discussion.

Warm Up

- What are your initial thoughts/feelings after watching the film?
- Even though Meryland lost the 2018 Junior Olympics, she was determined to work hard and compete again. After a period of intense training, she ultimately won in 2019. What do 'second chances' mean to you? Have you had any second chances over the course of your lifetime? If so, how have second chances changed you?
- Think about your own experiences, is there anything that you didn't succeed in at first that you'd like to try again? A time you lost but would like to try again?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**EVENTS IN THE FILM**

- What goal was Meryland working towards? Do you remember which steps she took to achieve that goal?
- What does Meryland’s family do to support her goal? How do her parents motivate her to become better? What roles might family and/or community play in supporting us towards achieving our goals?
- What happened to Meryland when she was six years old? What did Meryland and her parents do to recover and rise above what happened to her? Have you or anyone in your life ever experienced hardship that you’ve had to overcome? How does Meryland’s experience shape your reflections on your own?
- At the end, what does Meryland say is her larger purpose in life for boxing and winning? What are some ways Meryland inspired you?

IMPACT

- What part of the film did you identify with the most? Why?
- Did any moment in the film inspire you? If so, which part?
- How did a second chance motivate Meryland and her family? Does this make you think differently about your own hopes and dreams?
- Even though Meryland’s parents put her in ballet, music, and soccer classes, she pleaded with her parents to box instead. Does Meryland’s love for boxing as a young woman make you think differently about the sport? How so?
- Based on the portrayal of the Gonzalez family, how would you describe an immigrant family’s experience in America?
- In your own words, what is “the American dream?” After watching the film, did your ideas about the American dream change? If so, how?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**GOING DEEPER**

- Meryland’s dad says they have to make sacrifices in order to break barriers for their family’s future. Does seeing their sacrifices make you feel more or less empathetic to Meryland and her family? Why?
- Does this film remind you of someone in your life that has made sacrifices to support you? If so, how did they shape your life? What would you say to them today?
- Meryland’s dad describes her as a “rose trying to come out of the concrete.” What do you think he means by this imagery? In what ways does this description make you think differently about Meryland, her family, and their circumstances?
- Meryland declares that she “wants to become someone [important] in life” and she “wants to leave her mark.” What difference does she want to make in the world? Why do you think she’s so passionate about making a difference? What impact does Meryland’s example have on you?
- In the words of Meryland, what kind of mark or example would you want to leave on the world?
- How did this film invite you to reflect on assumptions you/we make about immigrant families and the lives they’ve lived? How does this film inspire you to resist assumptions about immigrants in America and their contributions to society?
- How do you stay persistent while working towards your goals? How would your attitude change if you knew you had to start over from the beginning?
- In what ways, if any, does this film inspire you towards action?
- What does this film have to teach us about the power of family and overcoming adversity? What are some ways that families and communities support individuals who want to achieve greatness and transform their life circumstances?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**TAKING ACTION**

- Volunteer at a program that empowers youth to become leaders in their communities and advocates for high-quality education.
- Research policies, laws, and policy makers who advocate for the rights of immigrants and prioritize their integration into American society through accessible paths to citizenship.
- Find ways to disseminate information to your community or tell your elected officials about policies that promote equity, nondiscrimination, and dignity for all immigrants.

RESOURCES

If you are interested in learning more, these helpful resources can be a good place to start:

[The Watts Labor Community Action Committee \(WLCAC\)](#) - Founded in 1965, the non-profit, community-based, human social services organization is dedicated to improving the quality of life for South Central Los Angeles residents.

[The Watts Century Latino Organization \(WCLO\)](#) - Since 1990, the Watts/Century Latino Organization (WCLO) has worked to address the needs of Watts' growing Latino population and improve inter-ethnic solidarity between Black and Latino residents. They address structural issues like pollution and gang violence, and have also partnered with local financial institutions and lending companies to increase opportunities for homeownership, small businesses and education for Watts residents.

[The Watts Empowerment Center and the Youth Mentor Initiative](#) - A state-of-the-art community center committed to the children, youth, and families within Watts Housing Projects. Resources offered range from sports leagues, after school tutoring, STEM media lab, and resume building workshops.

[5 La Nuevo Comienzo](#) - Founded by Jorge Gonzalez, Maryland's father, the project aims to help the Watts community by providing physical and art activities for children.

GEOFFREY GAURANO

Geoffrey Gaurano (Ed.M.) has over ten years of experience in K-12 education as a former teacher and middle-school principal. He has deep expertise in literacy instruction, curriculum writing, and social-emotional and social justice learning. He was most recently the educational consultant for YouTube Originals' *The Guava Juice Show*. He developed the show's educational approach on civics and community using the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) and the Social Justice Standards: Teaching Tolerance Anti-Bias Framework. Above all, Geoffrey is passionate that children's content is entertaining and appealing so that educational takeaways resonate and reach young viewers.

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