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Each year, a diverse group of teens audition for one of twenty spots in this Oakland program, where they will spend months working together to create an emotionally charged performance based on their lives. In a city plagued by violence and high student drop-out rates, Destiny Arts Center provides a safe haven for the teens to share their stories, to build community, and to express themselves through dance and performance art.

Central to the film are the stories of the five teens.

Jamany, who once thought guns, violence, and drugs were the way to fit in, barely escapes juvenile hall.

Nee Nee’s mother has breast cancer and struggles to pay the bills.

Alaysia is trying to cope with a childhood rape.

Omar, who has been through 11 foster homes, is diagnosed with HIV.

Tilly has little outlet for the pain of a difficult relationship with her girlfriend and resorts to cutting.

Yet as they unite beyond differences to create their production, the teens find voice and community.

Their journey, under the guidance of Destiny’s artistic director Sarah Crowell, reveals how collaborative art can be a foundation for personal strength, liberation, and hope.

“… I don’t know where I would be without dancing. I wouldn’t know myself, I wouldn’t know my breaking point… Without dancing, I would be scared of myself.”

– Jamany
On a chilly autumn night, we sat in a circle while the youth of Destiny Arts Center shared their stories with each other. They began with the words “If you really knew me …” We knew we were witnessing something important.

“If you really knew me, you would know that I spend most of my day on Facebook.”

“… you would know that my parents split when I was five.”

Each time around the circle, deeper stories emerged.

“If you really knew me, you would know that my father was abusive.”

“… you would know that these are cigarette burns.”

“… I was raped as a little girl.”

“… I was shot when I was eight.”

The young people were from Oakland, California, and this was the start of a new Destiny Arts Youth Performance Company, a select group of teens chosen each year to create a performance based on their lives. Plenty of hip hop dance moves were made that day—hinge kicks, tutting, chest pops—but the sharing played a special role in bonding the group.

We filmed the young people in the company over the course of a year, documenting the process as they turned their stories into art. The product is the film you are about to watch.

After making F·R·E·E, we understand the immense power in the simple act of sharing a story. Whether by listening or by telling our own, walls come down, bridges of empathy are built, and real change can happen when we begin with:

“If you really knew me …”

— Suzanne LaFetra & David Collier, filmmakers
Thank you for choosing to screen **F-R-E-E** with your class or group!

We hope that, like us, you are inspired by the teens’ stories and their performance.

With the help of educators and Destiny Arts Center, we’ve created this discussion guide as a road map to help you and your students navigate the issues raised in the film.

**There are two versions of the film:**
- Classroom Version: 56 minutes
- Feature Length Version: 73 minutes.

  *The feature length film can be screened in two segments. Stop it a little after 42 minutes. This is right after the scene where Tilly talks about her relationship with Rashidi.*

This guide is intended primarily for high-school age youth, but is appropriate for ages 13 and older.

The activities are meant to supplement the film, to give your class or group the opportunity to share their stories and ideas, to discuss the themes in the film, and to experience first-hand some of the exercises taught at the Destiny Arts Center.

**F-R-E-E** tackles a variety of relevant issues affecting today’s youth.

**As the story unfolds, themes emerge in the film...**

**POVERTY**
**COMMUNITY**
**HOPE**
**FREEDOM**
**TRUTH**
**FAMILY**
**STRUGGLE**
**GENDER**
**SELF EXPRESSION**
**VIOLENCE**
**SAFE SPACE**
SAMPLE LESSON PLAN

Here is an outline of a sample lesson plan. Feel free to use this one or customize your own with the more detailed plan.

Allow at least:

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MOVEMENT EXERCISES

Here are some Destiny Arts Center signature movement and theater exercises. They are a great way to explore the relationships in the story, embodying our bodies.

SILENT DISCUSSION

Length of Activity: 5-10 minutes
Set-Up: Students select one of the characters
Description: After reading the selected page, students imagine their character doing the action and then explain it to their partner using only nonverbal means. Students switch partners every 2 minutes.

The point of this exercise is to:
what is expected?

What do you think?

Freedom of speech and actions.

Hermione is going to look at her hair. What do you think she is thinking?

Another student is going to switch partners, and the new partner is going to switch places.

GOING DEEPER – EXERCISES

If you’d like to go expand your lesson plan and explore more options than just the ones above, here are some writing exercises to go a little deeper into the themes and ideas.

These can be expanded on or developed into their own discussion questions.

What do you think?

Freedom of speech and actions.

How would you feel?

Freedom of speech and actions.

What do you think?

These can be expanded on or developed into their own discussion questions.

THEIR PATH, MY EMPATHY

PERCEIVE, KNOW, CARE ABOUT

Length of Activity: 15-30 minutes
Set-Up: Provide students with pictures of the main characters: Lotel, Tani, & Jamary.

How would you feel?

Freedom of speech and actions.

Have each student pick one character and write the answers to the above questions. After the smaller groups have had a chance to discuss how the themes and ideas relate, have the students share their answers with the class.

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