

• VIEWER DISCUSSION GUIDE •

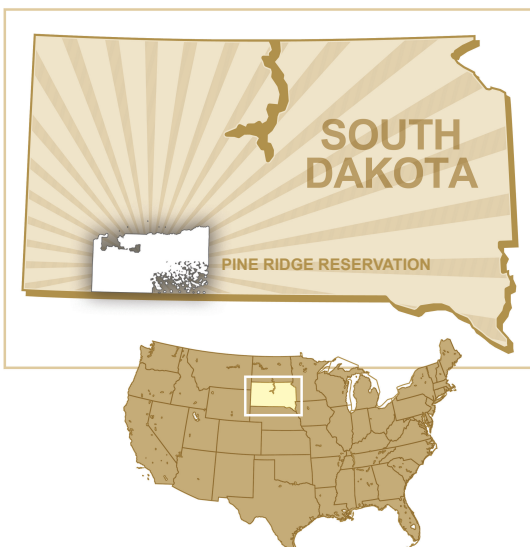
Video Letters from Prison



Natalynn, Jovannah and Jolena Poor Bear watch their first video letter from their father, Marvin Poor Bear. Image courtesy of Hollow Bone Films.

“When I saw that video, it was like seeing little girls. All of a sudden, they were five-, four-, three-years-old again. You know they were so happy, so elated, they twinkled, you know they really did, and I couldn’t believe it...I cried that night, I just cried so hard, I was like, “Why didn’t we do this before, why couldn’t this have been possible before?”

— Cindy Wheeler, mother of three girls whose father, Marvin Poor Bear, is incarcerated



Video Letters from Prison is an hour-long film that takes an unflinching look at the powerful role a father plays in the lives of his children. The film follows three young Lakota girls from the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota as they form a tentative relationship with their incarcerated father through the exchange of video letters. The filmmakers document the years that follow as the family mends and each girl matures, finding her own sense of identity and purpose. Included are a first visit to the prison, interviews with their mother, Cindy Wheeler, and their father, Marvin Poor Bear, and finally the filming of each of the girls’ high school graduations. Jolena, the youngest daughter, moves from being “futureless” to being awarded a Gates Millennium Scholarship at her graduation.

This viewer discussion guide is designed to encourage deeper exploration and conversations about the film, explore issues surrounding families experiencing the stress of separation and estrangement, as well as opportunities for mending family relationships.

“I loved him, and even if he didn’t think so, I was hoping that he already knew.”

— Jolena Poor Bear, age 14

PRODUCER’S NOTES



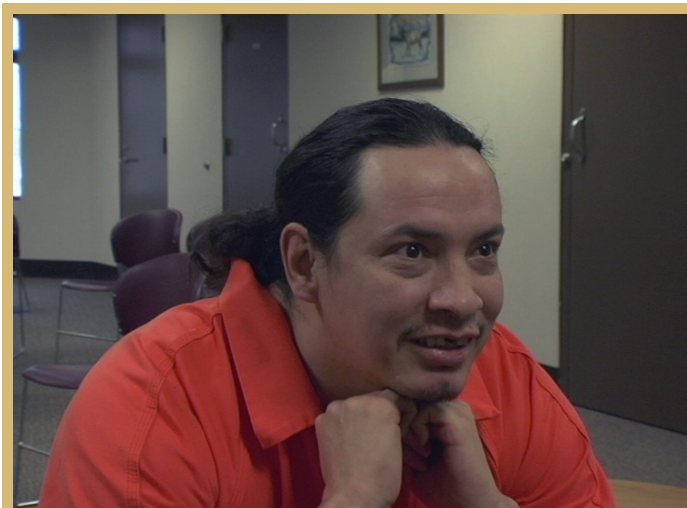
Milt (Producer/Director) & Jamie Lee (Writer),
Video Letters from Prison

Image Courtesy of Hollow Bone Films.

Milt Lee (Cheyenne River Sioux), Producer/Director

People have asked me about my motivation in doing *Video Letters from Prison*. Most folks believe it was because of my interest in prisoners and their families or that I was trying to save the Indians. But the truth is really much more personal. I was adopted at the age of three months. I didn’t have any connection with my birth/biological/real parents. I was raised and loved by two wonderful people that I called mom and dad, and who gave me some amazing opportunities to grow and become the person I am. But that can never change the fact that I wanted to know who my “parents” were. I began to understand that it wasn’t just me who longed for my parents. The same was true for anyone who had been separated from a parent for any reason. I could see that children want their parents no matter what.

I wanted people who didn’t know their dad to get to know him. It seemed to me that, for these three girls, the only way they were going to get connected was through this process of video letters. There just didn’t seem to be any other option. I also knew that no matter how much they professed to not like their dad or even care about him, it simply wasn’t true. They wanted their dad more than they knew, and if I could get these letters to him and talk to him about what was really going on with them, maybe something good could happen. Sure enough, not only did they really want him, but it turns out that he really wanted them, too. But, as it happens so many times in our culture, he didn’t have any tools or resources to help him to connect with them in a way that didn’t continue to hurt them. By showing this film, I hope we can all see the connections that are there, and begin to help families heal.



Marvin Poor Bear watches his second video letter from his girls (left).
Jolena Poor Bear laughing after watching Marvin’s video letter (right).
Images courtesy of Hollow Bone Films.



BY THE NUMBERS

1.6 million	Number of incarcerated adults in federal and state prisons in 2008 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice)
1 in 25	Estimated number of Native Americans 18 years old and older under the jurisdiction of the nation’s criminal justice system. This is 2.4 times the rate for Caucasians and 9.3 times the per capita rate for Asians, but about half the rate for African Americans (based on a statistical analysis from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999, and reported by the National Criminal Justice Association, 2003)
1%	Of the total U.S. population are Native Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008)
809,800	Estimated number of prisoners in 2007 who were parents of children under age 18 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice)
735,000	Number of inmates released from prison in 2008 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice)
133,947	Number of adults exiting parole in 2008 who returned to prison as a result of violating their terms of supervision. Nine percent of adults exiting parole returned to prison as a result of a new conviction (Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice)
20 million	Number of children living in a household with only one parent in 2002 (U.S. Census Bureau)
1.7 million	Number of single-father families with children under 18 in 2009 (U.S. Census Bureau)
9.9 million	Number of single-mother families with children under 18 in 2009 (U.S. Census Bureau)

DELVE DEEPER

1. **“I had gone to this workshop with your wife Jamie, and she talked about a mother and a father being a life-force of a child and their identity. I had been living with someone else and I was like, ‘Well, I could just replace him, I can just replace their father and you know everything will be okay and everything will be good, but as they got older, I realized that is not the truth. That’s not how it is. It wasn’t working.’” —Cindy Wheeler, mother**

Can a parent be replaced? How do your parents shape your identity? If one or both of the parents you were born to is not present in your life, how does that affect you?

2. **“Hopefully we can continue to make these videos, because if I’d seen the girls’ video before I got out of prison a couple years ago, I would have been a better man.” —Marvin Poor Bear, father**

What do you think Marvin means when he says that he might have been a better man if he’d seen his girls’ video before he got out of prison? How do connections with your family influence how you live your life? If you have limited contact with a family member, what could you do to make the connection stronger?

DELVE DEEPER, continued

3. **“When people ask about your Dad, you’re ashamed and you’re afraid because you don’t want to be associated with somebody who’s there. But now that we know who our Dad is and we got to see the kind of person he is, we know who we are and where we come from. When people ask us, we say, ‘My Dad’s in prison.’ But that’s okay because that doesn’t define who he is. We know who he is and we’re not ashamed.” — Jovannah Poor Bear, age 16**

What changed Jovannah’s feelings about her father? How does a change in communication affect relationships with your friends or family? In regards to the trampoline statement, who supports you when you fall? Why is a strong support system important to the Poor Bear sisters?

4. **When relationships are strained in a family, sometimes it helps to try to see things from the perspective of the other person. In the film, Marvin talks about how life in prison kept him apart from the family he loves. He says he missed being with his girls, hearing their laughter, listening to them argue, all the day-to-day interactions that many of us take for granted.**

When you hear Marvin talk about his family in the film, how does this change your perspective of “the man in prison?” What might change if you were to view things from the perspective of someone else in your family? How might it change the relationship for you?

5. **The narrator of the film says that “Fathers go missing for all kinds of reasons.”**

What other events or circumstances might cause a father or mother to “go missing” in the family? What actions could a person take to help stay connected to the missing parent?

6. **The film documents the day the girls meet their father for the first time since they were young. The emotions and thoughts that run through their mind as they get ready to go see him are heartfelt and beautiful.**

Would the girls have gone to visit their father and endure the precautionary procedures the prison set in place had it not been for the video letters? How might video letters from families help with inmate rehabilitation and prevent inmates from reentering the prison system after their release? What are the benefits of prison video letters for the inmates, inmates’ families, prison systems and taxpayers?

IDEAS FOR ACTION

1. Before the Poor Bear girls made a video letter for their father in prison, they were angry and sad that he was missing from their life. Once they exchanged video letters, communication opened up and led to healing for the whole family. Some say it can be healing to write letters that are never sent, including letters to those who are no longer living. Do you have a painful memory that you’d like to let go of? Consider writing a letter to the person you associate your painful memory with, and see what changes.
2. In the film you can see how the girls’ pain softens when Marvin shares a personal story about what he remembers from their childhood. Often it is the pain or anger that keeps us from connecting with a loved one who has hurt us. Consider writing a letter or using one of the social networks such as **Facebook**, **MySpace** or **Flickr** to reconnect. Instead of sharing the pain, share one or two good memories, or tell a story about something from your day.
3. More than 735,000 people were released from prison in 2008. Most states and many communities have programs to assist people reentering society through education, job training, counseling and medical services. Some programs are government sponsored, some are private foundations, and some are faith-based. If you have an interest in volunteering to help, contact The National Reentry Resource Center for local resources at www.nationalreentryresourcecenter.org/states.



RESOURCES

FILM

Video Letters from Prison web site

www.videolettersfromprison.com

WEB

National Reentry Resource Center

www.nationalreentryresourcecenter.org

This page on the National Reentry Resource Center site provides links to state resources for individuals who have been incarcerated, their families and volunteers.

Family Constellation Approach

In one of the interviews, Cindy Wheeler recalls a workshop when she was introduced to the idea that parents are the life force and identity of a child. The workshop was based on the Bert Hellinger Family Constellation Approach. For more information about Hellinger's theory and practice, visit:

<http://hellinger.langhofer.at/index.php?id=107>

<http://manykites.org/mainpages/FCWpage.htm>



Jovannah Poor Bear speaking at her high school graduation.
Image courtesy of Hollow Bone Films.

RADIO

Search for Indian

www.videolettersfromprison.com

A one-hour radio documentary produced by Milt Lee.

RESOURCE ORGANIZATIONS

National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI)

www.fatherhood.org

NFI seeks to improve the well-being of children by increasing the proportion of children growing up with involved, responsible and committed fathers.

The Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents (CCIP)

<http://e-ccip.org/index.html>

CCIP's mission is the prevention of intergenerational crime and incarceration through the production of high-quality documentation on and the development of model services for children of criminal offenders and their families.

VIDEO LETTERS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROJECTS

Strong Family

www.strongfamily.manykites.org

Web site for additional information on how to use Video Letters to strengthen individuals and families in your community.

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This guide was developed by Bodie & Kovitz Communications, www.bodieandkovitz.com.



Funding for this viewer's guide was provided by Native American Public Telecommunications (NAPT). Native American Public Telecommunications shares Native stories with the world through support of the creation, promotion and distribution of Native media. For more information, visit nativetelecom.org.