Discussion Guide for Emilio Estevez’s Film

THE PUBLIC

Ryan Dowd
Author of the ALA book, The Librarian’s Guide to Homelessness

Emilio Estevez
Filmmaker, Actor, Director, Writer and Activist
To promote *The Public*, Emilio Estevez did a cross-country tour, screening the film at libraries, homeless shelters and more.

After the screenings, Emilio did a Q&A for audiences with Ryan Dowd, lifelong homeless advocate and author of *The Librarian’s Guide to Homelessness*. This discussion guide is a result of that collaboration.

**How to use this guide:**

- Print this guide. Select your questions. Put them in an order that works for you. You don’t have to use our order. You don’t have to use all of them, but have a few extras ready in case you have extra time.
- Start with questions that will be easier for your audience in order to begin the conversation.
- Invite people into the discussion who are not speaking up.
- If the audience needs a little extra help “warming up,” you can use the extra Fun Facts at the end of this guide to add a little levity.

**Reminder from Ryan (who is an attorney)**

Please be respectful of the massive amount of time, effort and money that went into creating *The Public*. Public screenings of any movie require a special “public screening” license. DVDs only come with a license to screen a movie privately.

You can purchase a public screening license for *The Public* at [www.swank.com](http://www.swank.com).

Thank you!
Ryan J. Dowd, Attorney-at-Law
Library Question #1

The film begins with the following quote:

"Have you a real love of books and learning?... Now, do you like people, and do people like you? Do you like all kinds of people, the young as well as the old? People in all stations of life? You do? That's wonderful, because when you have these two important qualifications—love for books and love for people—you may well consider the vocation of a librarian."

Question: What stereotypes of librarians are confronted in this movie?

Moderator Notes

Available at www.HomelessTraining.com/ThePublic
Fun Fact:

Emilio was inspired to make this movie after reading an essay in the L.A. Times written by retiring Salt Lake City librarian, Chip Ward. In the essay, Mr. Ward explained how libraries are becoming “de facto homeless shelters,” and librarians are becoming “de facto social workers.”

Question: In what ways have libraries changed, and in what ways have the roles of librarians changed?

Moderator Notes
Library Question #3

Quote:

*Angela (Taylor Schilling)*: “*What made you decide to become a librarian?*”

*Stuart (Emilio Estevez)*: “*You know, I’ve been asking myself that question a lot lately.*”

*Angela*: “*It must be really nice to have a job where you get to sit around and read all day.*”

*Stuart*: “*Oh yeah.*”

*Angela*: “*I mean, do people even go to libraries anymore?*”

Question: This one is for the librarians in the room: Why did you become a librarian?

Moderator Notes
Library Question #4

Quote:

Anderson (Jeffrey Wright), director of the library, is talking to District Attorney Josh Davis (Christian Slater) about the lawsuit being brought by Ike (the patron who was asked to leave because of his body odor), and he says the following: “...libraries all over the country struggle with the balance between individual rights and the rights of other patrons to have a safe and healthy environment... Librarians take very seriously the right to freedom of information. It is a core tenet of what we do.”

Question: How do libraries balance the rights, needs and interests of diverse patrons? What does that look like in practical terms?

Moderator Notes
Fun Fact:

The Public was originally going to be made in 2008. When the financial crisis hit, the film lost its funding and had to be postponed.

Question: What is the greatest challenge facing libraries today?

Moderator Notes
Library Question #6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quote:</th>
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| **Stuart (Emilio Estevez):** “Books saved my life.”  
**Angela (Taylor Schilling):** “Saved your life?”  
**Stuart:** “Books helped me get sober, and helped me turn my life around. They were tangible. They were real. Something I could get my hands and my head around, so yeah, they saved my life.” |

| Question: What role have libraries played in your life? What role have books played in your life? |

| Moderator Notes |

Available at www.HomelessTraining.com/ThePublic
Library Question #7

Quote:

Library Director Anderson (Jeffrey Wright): “You know I devoted my entire life to preserving the freedom of information that flows in and out of this institution. The public library is the last bastion of true democracy that we have in this country, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to sit here and let you thugs turn it into a battlefield.”

Question: What roles do libraries play in democracy?

Moderator Notes

Available at www.HomelessTraining.com/ThePublic
Fun Fact:

In doing research for the film, Emilio spent a lot of time hanging out at the Los Angeles Public Library. In particular, he spent a lot of time with two desk-reference librarians (one female and one male) who worked together closely. They became the prototypes for Stuart (Emilio Estevez) and Myra (Jenna Malone).

Question: How would you explain the role of librarians in our society?

Moderator Notes
Fun Fact:

In the scene where Detective Ramstead (Alec Baldwin) and his ex-wife look for their son in the homeless shelter, Emilio added authenticity by standing off-camera and coughing. (Note from Ryan: In homeless shelter sleeping rooms you hear a lot of coughing).

Question: Why do you think libraries are important to individuals experiencing homelessness (other than for finding warmth)?

Moderator Notes

Available at www.HomelessTraining.com/ThePublic
Library Question #10

Quote:

*Library Director Anderson (Jeffrey Wright):* “Mr. Goodson, I’m well aware of the problem, but we’re a public library. We’re not a shelter for the homeless.”

*Stuart (Emilio Estevez):* “No. That’s exactly what we are. Every day of the week!”

Question: What is the appropriate role for libraries to play regarding homelessness? What about other social issues?

Moderator Notes
Library Question #11

Quote:

_Detective Ramstead (Alec Baldwin):_ “Why did you lie to me [about my son being in the library]?”

_Stuart (Emilio Estevez):_ “A librarian’s duty is to protect the privacy of the patrons. Maybe you’ve heard of the Connecticut Four?”

Question: What is a librarian’s responsibility to privacy and why is it so important?

Moderator Notes
Library Question #12

Quote:

*Patron to librarian:* “Can you tell me why so many civil war battles happened on national park sites?”

Fun Fact:

*All of the questions that patrons ask library staff are real questions that Emilio uncovered in interviewing librarians for the film.*

Question: For the librarians: What is the wildest question you have ever been asked?

Moderator Notes
Library Question #13

Fun Fact:

*Emilio chose the name “Stuart Goodson” for the lead character because his favorite book as a child was Stuart Little. The last name was a nod to Emilio’s mother, Janet Sheen (who thinks that he is a very “good son.”)*

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**Question:** For the librarians: What is the most meaningful patron interaction you have had?

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**Moderator Notes**

Available at www.HomelessTraining.com/ThePublic
Library Question #14

Fun Fact:

In the scene towards the beginning of the movie where the naked guy is singing in front of the window, there was an interesting event during filming. The Cincinnati Public Library received a call from the building across the street asking what the heck was going on at the library. The building across the street was the offices of the Catholic Diocese.

Question: Who are libraries for? What does that mean in practical terms?

Moderator Notes
Library Question #15

Quote:

*Big George (Che “Rhymefest” Smith):* “I killed him with my laser eyes. See, the government, they put this weapon in my head when I was a baby. It’s a laser. It kills people when I look at people for too long. It’s a chip. They put them in a lot of babies when they’re born.”

Question: What should libraries do about patrons with extreme body odor? What about nonviolent (but disruptive) mental illness?

Moderator Notes
## Homelessness Question #1

### Fun Fact:

> Many of the actors portraying homeless patrons in the film were, in fact, homeless patrons of the Cincinnati Public Library.

### Question: Most movies depict homeless individuals as either a bundle of stereotypes used for a laugh, or as “the noble poor” person, who is a flawless victim. In what ways does this movie humanize individuals experiencing homelessness?

### Moderator Notes
Fun Fact:

On the night that the crew was filming the scene where Stuart Goodson (Emilio Estevez) demands that Prosecutor Josh Davis (Christian Slater) lie down on the street for five minutes, it was 10 degrees outside. After the first take, Christian was very happy to be done, until Emilio informed him that it was just a rehearsal that wasn’t filmed and that Christian would have to lie on the ground again so they could film it!

Question: In what ways do both mayoral candidates use the plight of homeless individuals for their own political ends? How does this happen in real life?

Moderator Notes
Homelessness Question #3

Fun Fact:

*Stuart Goodson* (Emilio Estevez) is attacked by Mike, the addicted son of Detective Ramstead (Alec Baldwin). The stuntman who took the hit for Emilio was Taylor Estevez, a professional stunt coordinator (and Emilio’s son!). The scene took two takes, and Taylor was sore for days afterwards.

Question: Stuart treats Mike differently than the other homeless patrons. In what ways is addiction looked at differently when it affects middle class and wealthy families?

Moderator Notes
Homelessness Question #4

Quote:

*Cactus Ray (homeless patron played by Bryant Bentley):* “We all going to jail tonight?”

*Jackson (lead homeless patron played by Michael K. Williams):* “They’ll probably get us for trespassing, resisting.”

*Big George (Che “Rhymefest” Smith):* “I’ve never been to jail.”

*Jackson:* “That’s ‘cause you ain’t been on the street long enough. Give it time.”

*Big George:* “But I’m not a criminal.”

*Smutts (homeless patron played by Michael Douglas Hall):* “None of us are, brother.”

Question: In what ways do we criminalize poverty?

Moderator Notes
Homelessness Question #5

Fun Fact:

The actual director of the Cincinnati Public Library asked to watch some of the filming, but not on a night when everyone was naked. Staff arranged a good night, but the schedule was changed and she watched filming as 100 naked men were marched in front of her out to the waiting buses. Oops!

Question: What experiences have you had with individuals experiencing homelessness?

Moderator Notes
Homelessness Question #6

Quote:

*Lead homeless patron Jackson (Michael K. Williams):* “… Every public official in this town knows there’s not enough shelter for us people on the street. And those so-called Christians, they pretend like they don’t know that. Feed the hungry. Clothe the poor. House the homeless. Now that’s what Jesus said.”

**Question:** What responsibility do individuals have towards homelessness? What about the government? Churches? Businesses?

**Moderator Notes**
### Homelessness Question #7

**Fun Fact:**

*Emilio interviewed police in preparation for the film, and most said that they hate having to arrest naked people because “they don’t know where to grab.”*

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<tr>
<th>Question:</th>
<th>How should the police have responded to the homeless patrons barricading themselves in the library?</th>
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**Moderator Notes**
### Homelessness Question #8

**Fun Fact:**

Emilio chose Che “Rhymefest” Smith for the role of Big George after Emilio’s mother (Janet Sheen) saw a documentary about Che and his father who had been homeless. When Che went to meet his father for the first time (as an adult), his father wanted to meet in the library, because it was the only place he felt comfortable. Che is a Grammy-award-winning hip-hop artist.

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<tr>
<th><strong>Question:</strong> What is being done about homelessness in our community?</th>
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**Moderator Notes**

Fun Fact:

Emilio was inspired to write the nonviolent resistance at the end of the movie by his father, Martin Sheen, who has been arrested 69 times for peaceful protests around the issues of homelessness, nuclear disarmament and immigration. Emilio confesses to watching his father get arrested on TV as a child and thinking that Martin looked like a madman. It was only during the making of this movie that Emilio fully understood his father’s activism.

Question: What more could be done about homelessness in our community?

Moderator Notes
Homelessness Question #10

Fun Fact:

Emilio’s daughter, Paloma Estevez, is a professional musician who assisted with the music for the film, including all of the percussion sequences at the end that help build suspense for the final standoff.

Question: What are the stereotypes of homelessness? How are they addressed in the film?

Moderator Notes

Available at www.HomelessTraining.com/ThePublic
Fun Fact:

Most of the filming at the Cincinnati Public Library was done overnight while the library was closed to prevent disruption to the library. At the Toronto International Film Festival, actor Michael K. Williams (who played the lead homeless character, Jackson) discussed the impact it had on him to play a homeless character all night and then leave in the morning as real homeless individuals were lining up to get into the library.

Question: What are the causes of homelessness? What systemic causes of homelessness are represented in the movie? What systemic causes are not represented?

Moderator Notes
Homelessness Question #12

Quote:

Angela (Taylor Schilling): “You know, I was a lot of things before I was a drunk. I wasn’t always fixing broken heaters for cheap rent.”

Question: In what ways do we define people by their darkest moments?

Moderator Notes
Homelessness Question #13

Quote:

Stuart (Emilio Estevez): “Use it to get some food, maybe a room.”

Lead homeless patron Jackson (Michael K. Williams): “You gonna offer me money and then tell me what to do with it?”

Stuart: “No, I was just suggesting a few things that you might need is all.”

Jackson: “How do you know what I need?”

Question: What is your personal policy on panhandling? When, how and why do you give or not give?

Moderator Notes
Homelessness Question #14

Quote:

Stuart (Emilio Estevez): “Do you ever dream about getting off the street?”

Lead homeless patron Jackson (Michael K. Williams): “No, not really. I mean, there’s a certain freedom out there. You know, I may not have money and stuff, but on the other hand, I don’t have anything that anybody wants or can take. Now that’s freedom.”

Question: In what ways do we blame homeless people for homelessness with the idea that “some people choose to be homeless?” How might mental illness, substance abuse, trauma or systemic injustice affect the idea that people “choose” homelessness?

Moderator Notes
Fun Fact:

The film received some criticism for not including more female homeless individuals in the movie. The nudity at the end would have made it challenging, if not impossible, to recruit actors/actresses. Additionally, our society tends to prioritize “women and children” for housing, thus, individuals without access to shelter on the coldest nights tend to be overwhelmingly male.

Question: How does our community handle homeless men and women? What about homeless families?

Moderator Notes
Fun Fact:

There is a rich history of individuals using nakedness as a form of civil disobedience. In the civil war in Liberia (West Africa), female activists stripped naked publicly in order to shame warlords into attending peace talks. These efforts—along with others—successfully brought an end to the war.

Question: In what ways does the patrons’ act of stripping naked give power back to those without power?

Moderator Notes
**Bonus Question #2**

**Quote:**

_**Angela (Taylor Schilling):**_  "I refused to have dinner with him last month, and then the month before that, so he seems to think he’s really screwing me, even though he’s not really screwing me."

**Question:**  In what ways do vulnerable and poor women face greater challenges with sexual harassment than middle-class women?

**Moderator Notes**
**Bonus Question #3**

**Fun Fact:**

The Public was filmed in 22 days, a grueling race that was necessary because of budgetary constraints of independent film making, combined with the schedules of the all-star cast (who were all working for far below their normal rates in a city they had to fly to).

**Question:** The reporter (played by Gabrielle Union) knows it isn’t a hostage situation, but ignores it for ratings. How does the current media landscape force media to chase sensationalized stories?

**Moderator Notes**
Bonus Question #4

Fun Fact:

*Stuart (Emilio Estevez) is repairing a book about Islam that was defaced. After talking to Muslim leaders about the sensitivity around this topic, Emilio chose to have the production team create a fake book that could then be defaced.*

Question: Is Islamophobia getting better or worse? How?

Moderator Notes
Other Fun Facts

- *The Public* was the first film set in a library that Emilio played a role in since *The Breakfast Club*. As a nod to the earlier film, Stuart’s jacket was chosen to look like a letterman’s jacket. Additionally, in the scene where a librarian is doing “story time” with children, she is reading them the book *She Was Nice to Mice*, a book that Ally Sheedy wrote.

- Cincinnati Metro happily lent Emilio the buses used at the end of the movie. Ironically, though, they didn’t ask how the buses would be used or whether naked men would be sitting in them.

- In the original screenplay, the film had a very dark ending with Stuart being killed by the police.

- The inspirational posters hanging around the library with pictures of famous authors were all created by the art department of the film crew. The Cincinnati Public Library liked them so much, though, they kept them up after the filming was complete.

- The polar bear in the film really was in the Cincinnati Public Library on loan from a museum that was under renovation. It wasn’t there when Emilio scouted out the library originally, but it was there when they showed up to film. Rather than try to film around an enormous, stuffed polar bear, Emilio decided to write it into the script. The characters in the film call it “Barry White” because that’s what the real librarians at the Cincinnati Public Library called it.

- The original song that the homeless individuals would sing at the end of the film was “Don’t Stop Believing” by Journey. When Emilio sought permission to use song in the film, though, Journey said ‘no’ because it was being used in conjunction with nudity. One day, Emilio was sitting on a friend’s back porch when the song “I Can See Clearly Now” came on the radio. Emilio and his friend both immediately looked at each other and said, “That’s it! That’s our song!”

- The doors that the homeless patrons barricaded with furniture don’t actually exist in the Cincinnati Public Library. They were built by the production crew. In real life, the open floor plan of the library would have made it impossible to blockade that area.

- The character Big George (Che “Rhymefest” Smith) is an intentional reference to the character George in the Steinbeck book, *Of Mice and Men*. It was a happy accident, though, that the song “I Can See Clearly Now” pairs so well with George’s ability to see the world with the glasses that Stuart (Emilio Estevez) gave him to protect people from his laser eyes.

- Emilio had worked with some of the actors before (but not most):
  - Christian Slater – *Young Guns II* and *Bobby*
  - Jacob Vargas – *Bobby*
  - Spencer Garrett – *Bobby*

Available at www.HomelessTraining.com/ThePublic
Jenna Malone (who played Myra) wanted to have her character stay through the entire lockdown, but the nudity at the end made that impossible.

Che “Rhymefest” Smith (who played Big George) didn’t tell his mother about the nude scene at the end. The first time she saw the film—at the Cincinnati premier with hundreds of other people—she exclaimed “Oh, my baby!!” Later, Che commented, “It has been a while since my mom has seen my butt.”

Emilio originally planned on filming at the Los Angeles Public Library, but was told by staff that he could not film there. When he asked why, staff told him that the last film crew had used lights that overheated, causing sprinklers to activate, which ruined books. Emilio asked what amateur crew had made such a rookie mistake. When he found out it was the crew for the TV show The West Wing he sheepishly gave up.

Emilio chose Cincinnati for several reasons: 1) The Midwest has colder winters than California, which was important to the script, 2) Both of his parents are from Ohio and Emilio spends half the year living in Cincinnati, and 3) Ohio has great tax incentives that make independent film viable.

As part of the publicity tour for the film, Emilio and Ryan Dowd (author of The Librarian’s Guide to Homelessness) drove from Los Angeles to San Francisco. On the way, they stopped at the John Steinbeck Library in Salinas, California to pay homage to a central theme of the movie. They tried to use the bathroom, but in an act of “life imitating art,” they were unable to get into a bathroom because of the number of homeless patrons using it.

Emilio and Ryan outside the John Steinbeck Library in Salinas, California © Photo by Jacqueline Henretta
Available at www.HomelessTraining.com/ThePublic
• Emilio did screenings of the film for the annual conference of the American Library Association. The very first audience question was, “How did you capture our world so well?” The second question was, “Did you use a stunt butt?”

• Emilio did a screening for the residents of Hesed House, a large homeless shelter in Aurora, Illinois. During the Q&A afterwards, the residents commented on how well he had captured their world. In fact, many residents pointed out that several of the homeless characters in the film were very similar to other residents in the shelter.

Emilio and Ryan conducting a Q&A at the homeless shelter at Hesed House in Aurora, Illinois

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1 No, he didn’t.

Available at www.HomelessTraining.com/ThePublic
“There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here that topples all our success. The fertile earth, the straight tree rows, the sturdy trunks, and the ripe fruit... and in the eyes of the people there is the failure; and in the eyes of the hungry there is a growing wrath. In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage.”

*Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck