



# CHECK IT



OFFICIAL VIEWER'S GUIDE

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# ABOUT

# CHECK IT



## The Filmmakers

**Dana Flor** is a documentary director and producer based in Washington, D.C. Teamed up with Toby Oppenheimer, she co-directed and produced *The Nine Lives of Marion Barry*, a feature-length documentary about the infamous former D.C. mayor and politician that appeared on HBO and played closing night at the 2009 Silverdocs Film Festival. In addition to *The Nine Lives of Marion Barry*, Flor wrote and directed the Emmy award-winning documentary *Latinos in Beisbol* and the Emmy-nominated documentary *Cesar Chavez* for NBC. Flor also works on a wide range of stories for Reuters Television, CNN, National Geographic and others, covering breaking news and producing in-depth features throughout Latin America and around the world.

**Toby Oppenheimer** is a documentary director, producer, and cinematographer based in Brooklyn, NY. Along with Dana Flor, he co-directed/produced and shot *The Nine Lives of Marion Barry*. Oppenheimer directed two documentaries in 2011 for MSNBC Films—*The McVeigh Tapes* and *The Assassination of Dr. Tiller*—and co-produced *Devil's Playground*, the Emmy-nominated film about Amish teenagers that premiered at the 2002 Sundance Film Festival. He has directed, produced and shot on a wide range of subjects for PBS, CNN, BBC, A&E, Pivot, The History Channel, VH1, The Sundance Channel, Bravo, and many others.

## The Film

In a city with one of the highest reported rates of anti-gay hate crimes in America, a group of bullied ninth graders have finally had enough. They form a “family” called Check It and soon attract 200 members. But building a feared reputation comes with consequences. This tight-knit family, born of necessity, can't protect its members from poverty, and many turn to stealing and sex work for survival on the streets of Washington, D.C., picking up lengthy rap sheets along the way. When four key members are offered a way out of violence, they set their eyes on something that unifies them: fashion. Avoiding sensationalism at every turn, this gritty and moving account of standing your ground is sure to be talked about and not to be missed. (By Eli Horwatt)

**The following guide is intended to provide you with a range of Pre-Viewing, Viewing and Post-Viewing activities. They are followed by a set of questions based upon the film's larger thematic domains, some follow-up questions and quotations, and a page of weblinks for further investigation.**

Learn more:

[WWW.ITGETSBETTER.ORG/CHECKIT](http://WWW.ITGETSBETTER.ORG/CHECKIT)

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Before viewing the film: What do you know about gangs, what they do, and why people join them? What issues do you expect to find in a film about a gang? After the film: How did the film fit with or differ from your expectations?

When discussing why people get involved in the Check It gang, Tray asserts that “no one with the Check It is a thug.” What is the distinction that Tray draws between a “thug” and the gang members featured in the film? Do you agree with this distinction? Is there a significant difference between the Check It gang and other kinds of gangs?

Despite the fact that there are women and lesbian members of the Check It and a variety of transgender members, few cisgender women, trans men, or lesbians are focused on in the film (NOTE: “cisgender” is the term used to refer to a person whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth; a “trans man” is a person whose sex assigned at birth was female but whose gender identity is male). What might be the reason for the absence of cisgender female, lesbian, and trans male perspectives in the film? How might the inclusion of these perspectives have added to the viewer’s understanding of the Check It?

In some of his commentary, Duke, who trains Skittles in boxing, expresses homophobic attitudes. Considering his attitudes, why is he willing to work with Skittles? Does his attitude shift from the beginning to the end of the film? What are some of the other instances in the film where you can see homophobic and transphobic attitudes and behaviors?

What is the role of fashion in the film? In what ways is fashion significant to the Check It members? What are some of the fashion trends that you observe in the film? Are the Check It members fashion trend-setters?

Ron Moten describes the Check It as a “family.” Does the gang function in this way? What does Check It offer that the gang members might not have received from their biological families?

The Check It formed as a response to serious bullying, harassment, and violence experienced by the LGBTQ community in Washington, D.C. Was the formation of this gang a good response to the bullying, harassment, and violence? What other options might have been used to address these problems? Would these be more or less effective than the Check It’s approach?

There are a number of people in the film who try to help members of the Check It find a path away from gang life and prostitution. Do you think that any of these efforts can be successful in the long term? Do some methods have more of a chance of succeeding than others? If so, why?

Near the end of the film, Day Day suggests that members of the Check It are role models for many youth in their community. Do you agree? What does it mean to be a good role model?

Is the overall message of this film positive or negative? How did it make you feel? Explain your choice with clear examples from the film.

# PRE-VIEWING ACTIVITIES



## BEFORE VIEWING THE FILM WITH STUDENTS

Watch the trailer for Check It (<http://www.checkitfilm.com>). After viewing the trailer, make a list of all the themes students predict may emerge in this film. Discuss how effective/affective the trailer is as a media text. What emotions does it elicit in the viewer? What aspects of the trailer make you want to watch the film?

Familiarize the group with, and discuss terminology relating to, LGBTQ identities (go to <http://ok2bme.ca/>, click on 'Resources,' then 'Kids & Teens,' then 'What Does LGBTQ+ mean?') and make sure that students understand the difference between biological sex, gender identity and sexual orientation (go to <http://teenhealthsource.com/>, and type "Sex, Gender and Sexual Identity 101" into the search function of the website).

In pairs or small groups, have students explore LGBTQ bullying statistics (go to <http://nobullying.com/>, and type "LGBT bullying statistics" into the search function of the website). As a class, have students share information from the website that they found surprising and/or alarming.

In pairs or small groups, ask students to discuss stereotypes and myths associated with LGBTQ people. Then share the short film LGBTQ OutLoud Myths from OK2BEME (go to <http://ok2beme.ca/>, click on 'Resources,' then 'Videos'). As a class, discuss how many of the stereotypes and myths discussed in the video align with what students discussed prior to watching. Do these stereotypes and myths exist at their school, amongst their friends, at home, and/or in the community where they live?

As a class, discuss your perceptions of what it is like to be part of a gang. Make a list of reasons why an individual might choose to join a gang.



# VIEWING | ACTIVITIES



## WHILE VIEWING THE FILM WITH STUDENTS

Have students complete the PBS viewing guide on documentaries (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/docs/Copies%20of%20Viewing%20Guide.pdf>). Students can revisit their completed documents as a Post-Viewing Activity.

Have students jot down three to five ideas for discussion or questions that the film raises in their minds. As an Extension and/or Post-Viewing Activity, students can enter their questions into an online response or polling system and can vote on the questions or issues they would like to explore in further detail. Encourage students to use multiple levels of Bloom's Taxonomy.

Have students make notes on one of the Check It members featured in the film. Why does this person stand out? What is this person's backstory leading up to the filming of the documentary? Why did this person become involved in the gang? How does this person's identity and/or goals evolve from the beginning of the film to the end?

Have students make notes on one of the individuals involved in trying to help the gang members build self-confidence and find more opportunities in life beyond their involvement in the Check It. What are this person's motivations for helping? Are their efforts to help successful? Why or why not?



# POST-VIEWING ACTIVITIES



## AFTER VIEWING THE FILM WITH STUDENTS

Discuss with students their initial reactions to the film, the featured individuals, their sense of style, their gender orientation and sexual identity, and their feelings about the Check It. Did the students' feelings evolve over the course of the film? Did the film live up to their expectations after viewing the trailer?

What were students' initial perceptions of *Check It*? How did the film increase or change their understanding of gang culture? In what ways is this gang similar to or different from other gangs?

Have students choose one or more of the Check It members in the film and ask them to write from that person's perspective. What are the positive and negative aspects of being in the Check It?

Have students complete an exit note. The exit note should contain one idea that demonstrates what they learned from the film, as well as one question that they still have about the topic.

If you didn't before viewing the documentary, watch the short film LGBTQ OutLoud Myths (go to <http://ok2beme.ca/>, click on 'Resources,' then 'Videos'). Having learned about some of the stereotypes and myths presented in this video, how does *Check It* impact the class's understanding of LGBTQ stereotypes and myths?

Have students participate in a Socratic discussion on the film. Guidelines for Socratic discussions can be found here: <http://www.authenticeducation.org/documents/WhatSeminar04.pdf>

Consider some of the strategies used in the film to help gang members combat homophobia and transphobia, build self-confidence, and find more opportunities in life. As a class, brainstorm other possible strategies that could be used to fight the discrimination faced by the Check It members and to offer alternatives to being part of a gang.



# POST-VIEWING ACTIVITIES

CONTINUED



Hold a class debate about whether being part of the Check It is a positive or negative development in the lives of the individuals featured in the film.

At one point in the film, Day Day says, “I never show no one my weak side.... I’d rather not have a weakness, ‘cause that means nobody can have nothing to taunt me about, or nothing to throw in my face.” Have students write a journal entry about whether or not they agree with Day Day. Is it better to hide or be open about your weaknesses? In what ways can either option have a negative impact on you? Are there some weaknesses we are more likely to hide and some we feel more comfortable sharing with others? Are some people more able to share their vulnerabilities than others? If so, why might that be the case?

As a class, make connections between the experiences of homophobia and transphobia seen in the film and this kind of discrimination in your school and/or community. Discuss what is being done in your school and/or community to address these forms of discrimination. Are these initiatives successful? If your class does not feel that homophobia and transphobia are issues at your school or in your community, why is this the case?

As a class, use “The Gender Unicorn” to explore the concept of spectrums in relation to gender identity and sexual orientation (on Google, search “Confused About Gender? The Gender Unicorn Is Here to Help!” to access the infographic and an explanation about how to use it.) After looking at the infographic and reading about how to use it, have students discuss how they feel about the concept of a spectrum in gender identity and sexual orientation. Make a list of examples from the film where an individual exhibits fluidity in gender identity and/or sexual orientation or where an individual does not seem to fit into a neatly defined category of gender or sexual orientation.



# CULMINATING ACTIVITY



## EXPLORING THE BRIGHT SIDE OF LGBTQ RIGHTS AND IDENTITIES

Often when talking about LGBTQ rights or issues facing LGBTQ individuals and communities in the United States and abroad, we focus on the negatives. The documentary *Check It* focuses on a problematic yet compellingly powerful response to homophobia and transphobia experienced by one group of young people in Washington, D.C.

In this culminating activity, students should conduct online research or research within their own school and/or community to find positive role models and/or stories from the LGBTQ community locally or worldwide. For additional inspiration about the kinds of people and stories students are searching for, begin by watching the TED talk “This Is What LGBT Life Is Like Around the World” (go to <https://www.ted.com/>, and type the talk name into the search function on the website).

Based on their research, have students create a presentation to share their selected LGBTQ role model or LGBTQ-positive story. The presentation may address some or all of the following questions, as applicable:

**How is this person or event changing the lives of LGBTQ people for the better?**

**How is this person or event addressing stereotypes and myths about the LGBTQ community and changing perceptions of LGBTQ people for the better?**

**Why is this person a great role model for LGBTQ people?**

**Why is this person a great role model for non-LGBTQ people?**

**What makes this person or event innovative, original, and uplifting?**

**What connections can you draw between this person or event and the issues addressed in the film *Check It*?**

Students can use PowerPoint, Prezi (<http://prezi.com>), a glog (<http://edu.glogster.com>) or another teacher-approved presentation tool to present their findings.

# QUOTATIONS FROM THE FILM

"My father does not accept the fact that I'm gay. When I dress up like a girl, when I just do certain things, when I carry girl bags, he'll say stuff like, 'Take that shit off' or, 'I don't like that girlie shit,' but there's nothing he can do about it; he can't stop me. It's me, not him. He doesn't have to live this life; I do." - **Tray**

"They need somebody to plant seeds, but at the end of the day, they have to take the next step." - **Ron Moten**

"I would say we was good role models for a lot of youth because I had a lot of kids come up to tell me, 'I saw you stand up for yourself. I saw you take your ground. I saw you mark your mark and not let that guy come up to you and do whatever he want, whenever he want, and however he wanted.' We had two options, either to run or to fight, and we chose to fight.... I believe that we can go down in history, 'cause you know we changed a lot of things that used to go on and don't go on now. A lot of gay-bashing and stuff that used to happen, I think that we played a big role in it not happening anymore. Even though we had to go about it happening in a violent way, at the end it still proved a point. If no one was going to stand up for us, we stood up for ourselves." - **Day Day**

"I never show no one my weak side. That's why when I cry, I cry alone to myself. It's like Superman; you know once people found out that he was allergic to kryptonite, they used it against him. Every time he got strong, they made him weak.... I'd rather not have a weakness, 'cause that means nobody can have nothing to taunt me about, or nothing to throw in my face." - **Day Day**

"And that's how we made our name, fighting for each other. That's where we got our respect from. A lot of gays that are with the Check It, we're pushed in that direction, not having nowhere to go, not having no one to count on, and stuff like that. But no one with the Check It is a thug." - **Tray**

"The Check It, they had obstacles that most people don't have. Normally, people have someone to turn to, whether it's a mom, a teacher, a coach, right? They don't have anybody, so they lean on each other. That's what a gang can be. It's a family. When nobody else was there, they had each other." - **Ron Moten**

"The things that I actually been through in my life, I don't want no youth to go through. I just want everybody to learn from the mistakes that we went through. And what the Check It has actually shown is that if you in a situation you think you can't get out of, there is a way you can get out." - **Tray**

"I'm just glad to be where I'm at, to give back to people like Skittles. That's why I think... I can save you.... The rate you goin', you gonna be dead in two or three years. I mean, he really have a 50-50 chance of livin', with the gangin', bangin', with probably having unprotected sex. I said, 'Man, with the shit that you in, is death, period. You better change. You better go on another road, 'cause the road that you going down is dark and it's thin.'" - **Duke**

"Some of my friends still try to figure out why I'm so angry.... I'm like a ticking bomb. That's because young gay men who have been murdered, who been killed. Queens found in woods, in cars, in trash cans. Lot of kids out here in the streets like I was not even here today, but I am. Nobody can hurt me. There's nothing that you can do to me that haven't been done before to me." - **Day Day**

"Check It has the reputation of 'You don't mess with the Check It,' but it's my mission to train these kids and show them that... you can be fierce and you can be professional at the same time, and be accepted in the right way, in the good way, and not because you threaten somebody that you gonna kick their ass unless they accept you." - **Jarmal**



# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

*Ceasefire*: Considering gang culture within the context of the United Kingdom, the article “Black Gangs, White Lads: On (Mis) understanding Gang Culture” by Dom Anderson can be used to initiate a debate about how bias may influence perceptions of who we do and do not define as being part of a gang. Go to <https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/>, and type the name of the article into the search function of the website.

*Encyclopaedia Britannica*: The entry on the “Gay rights movement” offers a concise history of LGBTQ activism. Go to <http://www.britannica.com/>, and type the words “gay rights movement” into the search function of the website.

*Washington Post*: The article “Check It Crew Gets Its Close-Up” by Clarence Williams explores the making of the film, the history of the gang, and features more background about some of the gang members and community activists working with them. Go to <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>, and type the article name into the search function of the website.

*TEDx*: Artist iO Tillett Wright’s TEDx talk “Fifty Shades of Gay” introduces students to a photography project aimed at combating homophobia and transphobia and expanding the public’s stereotypical understanding of what it looks like to be an LGBTQ person in the US. Go to <https://www.ted.com/>, and type the title of the talk into the search function of the website.

*Trans Student Educational Resources (TSER)*: Explore the concept of how gender identity and sexual orientation are increasingly discussed as existing along a spectrum using The Gender Unicorn infographic. Go to <http://www.transstudent.org/>, and type the name of the infographic into the search function of the website.

***Check It (Film Website)***: Learn more about the filmmakers who created *Check It*, read press reviews, check out local screenings, and find out where to buy the film. <http://www.checkitfilm.com>

*TED*: In Yoruba Richen’s talk “What the Gay Rights Movement Learned from the Civil Rights Movement,” she explores the ways in which the fight for racial equality and gay rights are more interconnected than customarily believed. The talk also offers an overview of the history of major events in the civil rights movement and the LGBTQ rights movement. Go to <http://www.ted.com/>, and type the title of the talk into the search function of the website.

*Fashion Helps Toronto*: This organization offers a Canadian example of ways in which the fashion industry attempts to help less fortunate communities find opportunities in this industry. <http://www.fashionhelps.org>

*Indiegogo*: The film’s page on Indiegogo offers insight into the motivations for the documentary project at the same time that it allows students to explore crowdfunding as an alternative way for individuals and groups to fund their business, creative, and/or social justice enterprises. <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/check-it#>

*The Advocate*: The article “Why Can’t We Talk about Homophobia in the Black Community?” by Daniel Reynolds tackles the issue of how homophobia manifests itself in various communities and the importance of thinking about the intersections between various forms of discrimination. Go to <http://www.advocate.com/>, and type the title of the article into the search function.

*Gangfree.org*: In the section called “Why People Join Gangs,” this website offers a basic exploration of some motivations for why people join gangs. Classes can use the website to explore similarities and differences between the Check It and gang culture more broadly. <http://www.gangfree.org>

***Check It Enterprises***: Support the *Check It* by purchasing clothes and other merchandise from their store. <http://www.checkitenterprises.com>

# ABOUT



THE CHECK IT AND IT GETS BETTER PROJECT MARCH TOGETHER AT WASHINGTON DC PRIDE, JUNE 2017.

## Who We Are

This Viewer's Guide was put together by education staff at the It Gets Better Project, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in Los Angeles, California ([www.itgetsbetter.org](http://www.itgetsbetter.org)). With affiliates operating on four different continents, the It Gets Better Project boasts a truly global operation. Together, they use the power of story - told through online videos, social media, films (like *Check It*), books, and more - to inspire, empower, and connect LGBTQ+ youth around the globe. So far, over 60,000 It Gets Better videos have been shared.

