



THE KIDS ARE ALL RIGHT

Discussion Guide

Introduction

THE KIDS ARE ALL RIGHT is a half-hour documentary about a renegade Jerry's Kid named Mike Ervin. Mike was a Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA) poster child in the 1960s. Today he is a disability rights activist who challenges the MDA's use of pity to raise money in its annual Jerry Lewis Labor Day telethon. THE KIDS ARE ALL RIGHT follows Mike as he organizes Jerry's Orphans, a group that protests against the telethon each year. The film offers a critique of the "pity approach" to fundraising by contrasting the telethon's outdated attitudes—personified by Jerry Lewis—with a view into the real life of a disability civil rights activist today. This discussion guide to THE KIDS ARE AL RIGHT was created as a tool for organizers and activists to start discussions about the issues presented in the video in their own communities.

Background

Charities have used poster children to raise money since the 1930s because it works. People see a child with leg braces and they drop a coin in the jar or call in a pledge. While

such charities may have good intentions—and help the people they serve—the images they use to raise money reinforce outdated attitudes towards disability. When charities implore the public to “help find a cure,” they imply that the source of the problems that people with disabilities face is their medical conditions. Which means the answer to their problems is curing them. This is what is known as the “medical model” of disability. If disability is an illness to be cured then people with disabilities can’t be productive members of society until they no longer have disabilities. And that leads to the message that society doesn’t really need to support people with disabilities with things like accessible public transportation, integration in schools and equal employment protection. Yet these are the very gains made by the disability civil rights movement over the last thirty years.

The Jerry Lewis Labor Day Telethon may seem like a quaint relic and a harmless example of this outdated view of disability. But it is still watched every year by millions of viewers around the world. Many of these viewers will absorb the message that people with disabilities want and need nothing more than a big charity to take care of them. Activists like Mike believe that the message of the telethon seriously undermines the disability civil rights movement and that’s why he organizes actions to protest against it.

The Video

THE KIDS ARE ALL RIGHT introduces viewers to Mike Ervin, a disability civil rights activist living in Chicago. Mike tells the story of founding Jerry's Orphans, a group that protests against the Jerry Lewis Labor Day telethon. He describes an article published by Jerry Lewis in Parade Magazine in 1990 as the catalyst that inspired him, along with his sister Cris and wife Anna, to found the group.

Mike goes on to describe the press coverage of Jerry's Orphans and the reaction of the Muscular Dystrophy Association and Jerry Lewis. He presents his criticisms of the telethon throughout, arguing eloquently for an end to pity. The interviews with Mike are edited together with scenes documenting three years of protests by Jerry's Orphans in Chicago. Each year, the group uses different tactics with different results. The video shows how each protest plays out and how the different players—telethon hosts, volunteers, MDA representatives—react. Ultimately, viewers see that direct actions like these protests can have an effect over time.

Before Viewing Questions

Discuss these questions prior to watching the video.

1. Do you have a memory of watching the Muscular Dystrophy Association's Jerry Lewis Labor Day telethon or another fundraising campaign? What is (or was) your impression of that program?

2. Have you ever been a poster child for a charity? What do you imagine it would be like to be a poster child at an event like the telethon?

3. Have you ever made a donation to a charity? What charity and why?

After Viewing Questions

1. Do you think the telethon uses pity to raise money? What have you seen in this video or in past broadcasts of the telethon that have shaped your opinion? Should charities use poster children (or goodwill ambassadors, as they are sometimes now called)?

2. Have you ever felt like someone pitied you for having a disability? Have you ever felt pity for someone with a disability, or for yourself? What effect do you think pity has on people with disabilities?

3. In the video, Mike shows some of the tax documents filed by the MDA. They indicate that the MDA raises the vast majority of its funds through other means. Why do you think the MDA continues to broadcast the telethon? What is the impact of having Jerry Lewis as its spokesman?

4. Like many grassroots activists, Jerry's Orphans use direct action and civil disobedience to raise awareness of their criticisms of the Jerry Lewis Labor Day telethon. What are some of the things Jerry's Orphans do in the video? How do other people (volunteers, MDA and hotel

staff, telethon hosts) appear to deal with and respond to the conflict and confrontation of direct action? Do you think the methods used by Jerry's Orphans are effective?

Discussion Points

Medical Model vs. Social Model

The "medical model" looks at disability as an illness of an individual. It assumes that the problems people with disabilities face are a result of their physical conditions and the solution is curing them. In this view, people with disabilities can't participate fully in society until they are no longer disabled. The "social model" takes the opposite view, that people with disabilities are prevented from participating fully in society by physical, attitudinal and institutional barriers. In this view, people who have disabilities can be who they are and lead full, productive lives with the accommodation, support and accessibility they deserve as basic civil rights.

What disability model(s) have you seen used in the content of the telethon? What model(s) do you see in your community and at the national level? How important is it to you to fund medical research and to "find a cure"?

Charities

In the video, Mike says he agrees with Jerry Lewis and the MDA when they say, "the telethon shows how much America cares." He says,

How much they care is that our problems are so unimportant to them that we have to go on TV once a year and we have to juggle and put on a minstrel show in order to get things like wheelchairs. Why should people have to go through all that to get a wheelchair? Why is our mobility and quality of life so unimportant that we have to resort to these lengths just to get the support we need? That tells you quite a bit about how much America cares.

Do you have a personal experience receiving services or assistance from a charity like the Muscular Dystrophy Association? What role should charities have in the lives of people with disabilities and in the disability community? How should charities raise money?

Media Representations of Disability

The Jerry Lewis Labor Day Telethon has been broadcast for nearly forty years. What images of people with disabilities do you see on television and in other media today? How is the general public influenced by these images? How are people with disabilities influenced? What can members of the disability community do to change the way they are represented?

Online Resources

Reference

History of the ADA

www.adata.org/whatsada-history.html

History of Independent Living

www.acils.com/acil/ilhistory.html

Berkeley Disability Rights History web site

adawatch.org/berkeleywebsite.htm

National Organizations

ADAPT

ADAPT.org

American Association of People with Disabilities

www.aapd-dc.org

Independent Living USA

www.ilusa.com

National Council on Disability

www.ncd.gov

The National Council on Independent Living

www.ncil.org

National Disabled Students Union

www.disabledstudents.org

National Spinal Cord Injury Association
www.spinalcord.org

Not Dead Yet
www.notdeadyet.org

People First
www.peoplefirstofillinois.org

TASH
www.tash.org

World Institute on Disability
www.wid.org

Anti-Telethon Activism

Laura Hershey's Crip Commentary

www.cripcommentary.com/LewisVsDisabilityRights.html

Production Credits

Producer/Director/Editor: Kerry Richardson

Camera: Kerry Richardson, Steven Ciampaglia, Liz Miller,
Michele Mahoney

Additional Editing: Steven Ciampaglia

Original Score: Scott Lockard

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Special Thanks To: Steven Ciampaglia

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www.widc.org

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www.fex.org

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www.cityofchicago.org/CulturalAffairs

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TRT: 29:30

Color NTSC

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DVDs are open-captioned.

VHS tapes are closed-captioned.

For more information on the video and the outreach
campaign, please visit the film's web site at
www.thekidsareallright.org

About the Makers

Kerry Richardson is an independent producer, educator and media activist. She produced, directed and co-edited KISS THE VOTE 2000 for the Little City Foundation series The Kiss My TV Show. KISS THE VOTE 2000 examines disability issues at the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles. The program received a Media Access Award in the TV News Magazine/Special category from the California Governor's Committee for the Employment of Disabled Persons, as well as two Hometown Video Festival awards from the Alliance for Community Media. She also taught television production to members of the disability civil rights group ADAPT, collaboratively producing a monthly public affairs program for public access TV at CAN TV in Chicago.

Kerry teaches video and digital arts at both the college and high school levels. She has also consulted for the Independent Television Service's Community Connections Project, coordinating national outreach campaigns for documentaries such as REFRIGERATOR MOTHERS and SWEET OLD SONG.

Mike Ervin is a writer and disability rights activist living in Chicago. His play The History of Bowling was produced at the Victory Gardens Theater in Chicago in 1999 and 2000, by the Know Theater Tribe in Cincinnati in 2001 and at Mixed Blood Theatre in Minneapolis in 2002. He also received a 2001 playwright's fellowship from the Illinois Arts Council. His other theater productions include The Plucky and Spunky Show, which he co-wrote with Susan

Nussbaum. It was originally produced at the Remains Theatre in Chicago (1990).

Mike has had three short stories published: Man versus Wood and The Antelope (St. Andrews Review/1982) and Coitus Interruptus (Staring Back, an anthology of writers with disabilities/1997). By day he is a free-lance journalist and has published over 1,000 articles and essays - mostly on disability topics - in more than 40 newspapers and magazines, including the Chicago Tribune, the Los Angeles Times, the Miami Herald and the Progressive.

Mike is a founding member of the Chicago chapter of ADAPT. He has been arrested over a dozen times for civil disobedience. Mike is founder of Jerry's Orphans. He has also served on the board of directors of Access Living and the Council for Disability Rights.