



Cinema/Chicago and the Chicago International Film Festival
Education Program Screening: *The Closer We Get*
Director: Karen Guthrie
81 minutes

Please use the below synopsis/study questions to lead your students in film preparation and post-screening discussion. Following the field trip, students are required to respond to the screening with a one-page essay. Essays must be sent to Cinema/Chicago in order to be invited to subsequent film screenings.

Synopsis

The Closer We Get is an autobiographical portrait of loyalty, broken dreams and redemption told from the perspective of director Karen Guthrie. The film is a vivid chronicle of Karen coming to terms with two losses, one in the present as her mother, the family anchor, suffers a stroke, and one in the past—of her nuclear family shattered years prior by her father's departure to Africa. Full of surprising revelations and reflection, Guthrie's personal story overcomes an affecting and resonating look at post-colonialism and the complicated bonds of family.

First Person Documentaries

Documentary films are defined as non-fiction films intended to document an aspect of reality. More often than not, the director is not the principal subject of the film, but instead an objective presence in telling his or her subject's story. There are many directors, however, who choose to turn the cameras on themselves and make their stories the subject of their films, called first person documentary. *The Closer We Get* is an example of this subjective first person documentary.

Sometimes these films are categorized as personal essays. One of these films, *Five Broken Cameras* (2011) is the first-hand account of the Palestinian resistance told through the home videos of a Palestinian farmer. This film was also nominated for an Academy Award in 2012.

This style of documentary filmmaking can also be used to highlight a cause or to instill activism or change. A personal essay film that helped inspire a change was Morgan Spurlock's *Super Size Me* (2004). He used the personal essay style to document his dramatic lifestyle change after eating only McDonalds super size meals for 30 days. It was after his documentary was released that McDonalds eliminated the super size meals from the menu.

Study Ideas/Questions

1. At the beginning of the film, Karen calls herself “the family oddball.” How would you describe yourself in relation to the rest of your family? Why?
2. Karen says she feels this sense of obligation to her mother following her stroke. Why do you think that might be the case? Do you feel an obligation to your parents?
3. One of the main questions raised in the film is personal and familial identity. How important is your family to your own personal identity? Why or why not? What do you use to define yourself? Do you feel like you create an identity around your family? Is your family your identity? Why or why not?
4. Towards the end of the film, Ann says “no one knows what happiness is or isn’t.” What do you think happiness is? What other ways do you think one could describe happiness?
5. Was there any part of the film that particularly struck you? Why?
6. Do you consider this to be a film about acceptance? In what ways do you think acceptance plays a role in Karen’s life?
7. What are your thoughts on Ian’s relationship with the rest of the family?
8. The film is called *The Closer We Get*. In what ways does the Guthrie family become closer? What do you think of this closeness and how would you describe it?
9. Would you find it easy or challenging to document your family’s life on camera during a difficult period of time? Why or why not?
10. If you did document your family’s life for a film, what would be the subject and theme? What is the “story” of your family?
11. During the opening and ending sequences, Karen says in voice over “we don’t get to choose what we inherit.” What do you think that means? Are there any aspects of your family members you think you’ve inherited?
12. Do you think Karen changes from the beginning to the end? In what ways might this experience have changed her?

Useful Resources

The Closer We Get Film [website](#)

Chicago International Film Festival [website](#)

Guide prepared by Hannah Hoffman, Rebecca Fons – Cinema/Chicago, 2015

