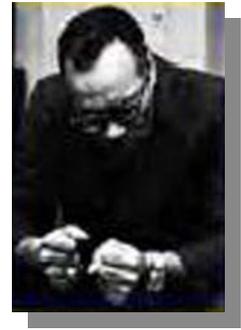


Every Child is Born a Poet:
The Life & Work of Piri Thomas
Discussion Guide
for Youth Audiences



**Developed and written by Faith Rogow, Ph.D., Insighters Educational Consulting,
in collaboration with
Outreach Extensions.**



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The Annie E. Casey Foundation

Every Child is Born a Poet is one of the public television programs showcased in the Reentry National Media Outreach Campaign. All productions incorporate the theme of **reentry into family and community**. These and other programs are elements of the Making Connections Media Outreach Initiative (MCMOI), an outreach project supported by The Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF). Launched in February 2001, MCMOI links public television stations to local stakeholders as a means to promote the Foundation's Core Results for strong and connected neighborhoods for children and families.



Dear Colleague,

The making of this film stems from my having read Piri Thomas' book *Down These Mean Streets* in 1972 as a twelve year old. I was a 7th grade student at an all-boys prep school on New York's Upper East Side. I was privileged and had never set foot in Spanish Harlem. I was, however, the only Jewish person in my class and I could identify, in reading *Down These Mean Streets*, with Thomas' feelings of being an outsider. I could also relate to his frustration and anger as he struggled to win acceptance from family and peers and to forge a unique identity for himself.

While the book made a big impression upon me, its long-term impact was not clear until many years later, when, as an adult, I worked as an advocate for community-based alternatives to prison for teens and young adults in the criminal justice system. There I witnessed an intense hunger for poems and stories, which validated people's experiences and helped them to understand the circumstances, which lead to their incarceration. And it was through my work in the criminal justice arena that, by chance, I had the opportunity to meet Piri Thomas.

Soon after our encounter, I re-read *Down These Mean Streets* and spent time observing Thomas conduct readings of his poetry and stories and lead workshops on creativity in schools and prisons. Seeing the positive impact his words, ideas and personality were having, I decided to create a documentary film that featured Thomas' writings and placed them in the context of his life story and the educational work he had been involved with ever since his release from prison in 1956. I wanted to spread his message and ensure his legacy.

The process of making this film was very challenging. There were times I was ready to give up, due to the incredible difficulty in raising the money necessary to make the kind of film I envisioned. Having never made a film of this scope and complexity, I had to learn many new skills as a director and producer. I made mistakes along the way that were very painful in terms of lost time and productivity. My self-confidence was constantly being tested. I joked to myself that I had to experience, in some form, all the trauma and turmoil that Piri had felt in his life struggles, in order for this film to be made. I would often hear Piri's own words in my head, echoing the struggle at hand. I always knew deep down, however, that this was a film that had to be made and some how would get finished.

There have been many rewards in the process of completing the film, but the greatest of all has been the opportunity to spend many hours with Piri Thomas, listening to his stories and his wisdom. *Every Child is Born a Poet* represents my best effort to translate into the medium of film Thomas' work and art. Ultimately, my goal has been to make a personal and inspirational film that reflects Thomas' belief that individual creative expression is not only a means of human enrichment, but a tool of individual and community survival. I hope you have enjoyed it.

Sincerely,
Jonathan Meyer Robinson

INTRODUCTION

The Film

A mix of documentary, poetry, storytelling, drama, and performance, *Every Child is Born a Poet* explores the life and work of Piri Thomas (b. 1928), the Afro-Cuban-Puerto Rican author of the classic autobiographical novel *Down These Mean Streets* (1967). The hour-long film traces Thomas' path from childhood to manhood in New York City's Spanish Harlem, *El Barrio*, from the 1930's through the 1960's. It explores his parents' immigrant experience, home life during the Great Depression, membership in *barrio* youth gangs, his struggle to come to terms with his mixed-racial identity, travels as a teenage merchant marine, his heroin addiction, notorious armed robbery of a Greenwich Village nightclub, and six years spent in prison, his emergence as a writer, and his on-going work of forty-five years as an educator and activist empowering marginalized and incarcerated youths.

Why Use *Every Child is Born a Poet*?

Every Child is Born a Poet is a riveting portrait of a life lived through struggle, self-discovery, and transformation. That makes it a good model for helping viewers who are also struggling to discover and transform themselves and their world. Young people, in particular, may see themselves in Piri Thomas' life story as he struggles with his identity as a person of color, growing into manhood, gangs, drugs, incarceration, urban life, poverty, and even the death of a parent.

What distinguishes this film from other tools is that, in addition to documenting Thomas' transformation, it also shares the tools of that transformation. We see and hear how writing helped Thomas both escape from and connect to his roots in *el barrio*. Thomas' writing and first-person voice can inspire young people to find their own voices.

Most importantly, Piri Thomas is hopeful in the face of difficulty and despair. For example, he writes, "As prison blocks off your body, so it suffocates your mind. But, even in prison, one can learn to rise above the gray roofs and rise to the stars." Thomas' life and eloquent words leave people feeling that they have power. His belief that any person can change and that every person can act is infectious, making *Every Child is Born a Poet* an especially valuable tool for those working with young people who may have lost a positive sense of direction.

In addition to engaging people in personal reflection, you can use *Every Child is Born a Poet* to spark discussions on:

- Conflict resolution / violence prevention
- Health, including mental health
- Latino (especially Puerto Rican) experience in the U.S.
- Poverty
- Race and Racism
- Reentering family and community following incarceration
- Substance abuse

Audiences / Partners

Through its powerful emphasis on storytelling, *Every Child is Born a Poet* offers an excellent springboard for self-reflection and inquiry. It is well suited for use in a variety of settings and is especially recommended for use with:

- Families of inmates or those recently or about to be released.
- High schools
- Community-based youth programs
- Counselors and counseling training programs
- Youth groups at churches, synagogues, mosques,
- People involved with the justice system (e.g., youth in detention, guards and staff of youth detention facilities, judges, attorneys, police officers, parole officers, social service providers, educators)
- Colleges, universities, and community colleges, especially in conjunction with departments of Latino Studies, English / Creative Writing, Sociology, Law, Criminal Justice / Law Enforcement, Social Work / Counseling, Psychology
- Substance abuse prevention and recovery programs serving youth

USING *EVERY CHILD IS BORN A POET*

This guide is especially designed to help you use *Every Child is Born a Poet* to engage youth who are facing challenges related to incarceration. It contains suggestions for ways to help young people think more deeply about the issues raised in the film, and to use the film to help young people think more deeply about their own lives.

The film can be used in its entirety, or you can use segments. If you do not have time to show the entire 60-minute film, you might show a single vignette or poem.

The “Exploring the Film” section provides different ways to follow-up on a screening. Each issue or point provides a suggestion for Discussion and a suggestion for an Activity. The discussion questions can also be used as writing prompts. As you make choices about how to work with your group, consider the strengths and limitations of the various methods of engagement:

Discussion – Engaging in conversation is an easy way for many people to share with one another. It is especially useful as a starting point for deeper reflection or action.

Writing – Writing provides more time to reflect than does discussion. Because it is done individually and allows for editing, it can also provide a safe way to explore emotional topics. In this context, writing is not an exercise in grammar. People should be free to write what and how they want. Be clear about whether writers will be asked to share what they wrote and with whom. Also be clear about what kinds of feedback writers can expect.

Activity – In part, this option is about learning style. Some people will be able to express themselves better or learn more from doing a hands-on activity than from talking or writing. In addition, many of the activities are designed to be stepping stones to taking action in the real world. As Piri Thomas’ life illustrates, taking action provides hope. It helps people know that they can do something to make change.

The suggestions in “Exploring the Film” are designed for use in a variety of settings, so not every suggestion will apply to your situation. Rather than attempt to address everything, choose one or two questions or activities that best meet the needs, abilities, comfort level, and interests of your group.

Things to Consider as You Plan

Who Should Facilitate? – Because the film raises tough issues, and because young people can find themselves in uniquely vulnerable positions, it is important to have a facilitator who is experienced and who has (or who can easily develop) a trusting relationship with and among group members.

Goals – Be realistic about what you hope to accomplish. If you are looking for major change, you may want to consider convening a series of meetings rather than a single event.

Involving Stakeholders – If groups of people are the topic of conversation, it is important to let members of those groups speak for themselves. So, for example, if you were discussing the impact of racism on Nuyoricans, it would be important to involve people from Puerto Rican heritage in the conversation.

Effective Sharing – Choose a method of sharing that will meet the needs of your group and help you reach your goal(s). Discussion? Writing? Action? Some combination of those things? As you choose, take into account the language levels and abilities of group members. For example, discussion can be difficult if group members are not all comfortable conversing in the same language. Writing might be an intimidating choice for people who have low-level literacy skills.

Also consider the comfort level of the group. Do you already have a close relationship with group members or are you meeting them for the first time? The less pre-existing trust, the less appropriate it is to use particularly intimate or intense methods of sharing.

Support – Piri Thomas speaks bluntly and honestly about sometimes brutal and incendiary issues. Hearing his stories can evoke intense emotions in some viewers. Know who your local support agencies and/or professionals are and how to contact them in case referrals are appropriate.

Also, pay close attention to how prepared participants are to tackle certain kinds of issues. Take special care not to push individuals too far. If a question or activity seems too personal, skip it. If you are dealing with young people who are not ready to talk about their own situations, try altering questions so that participants can consider them as if they were talking about someone else.

Be Prepared to Facilitate – Check the background information and resources so you have enough factual knowledge to keep people on track. Most importantly, review the film and other materials prior to your event and deal with your own emotions before you walk through the door. You will be much more effective if you are not trying to sort through your own emotions at the same time that you are trying to guide others in dealing with theirs.

Preparing the Group

For people to share openly and honestly, they need to feel comfortable and safe. As a facilitator, you can help set that kind of atmosphere by doing the following:

Do introductions. If group members do not already know one another, take some time for everyone to introduce himself or herself.

Set ground rules for discussion. Involve the group in setting some basic rules that will help them feel safe. Those ground rules will generally cover three areas:

1. Confidentiality – Do people want to ask others not to repeat what they have said outside the group?
2. Language – To ensure respect, everyone should agree that certain kinds of language, e.g., put downs or yelling, are off limits. Also, to ensure clarity, ask people to speak in the first person (“I think...”) rather than generalizing for others (“Everyone knows that...”).
3. Taking Turns – Use techniques to make sure that everyone who wishes to speak can do so, that one person does not dominate, that no one is attacked, that no one is forced to reveal things they do not want to talk about. Be sure to be clear about what your role is.

Remind people of the value of listening. You might want to ask people to practice formal “active listening,” in which participants listen without interrupting the speaker, then rephrase to see if they have heard correctly. Or you may just want to remind them that engaging in dialogue is different from participating in a debate. In a debate, participants try to convince others that they are right. In a dialogue, participants try to understand each other and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening to one another actively.

Remind participants that everyone sees through the lens of their own experience. Because who we are influences how we interpret what we see, everyone in the group may have a different view about the content and meaning of the film, and all of them may be accurate. If there are disagreements, ask people to be clear about the evidence they are using to reach their conclusions.

Establish a time-out mechanism. Have a pre-planned strategy for what to do if the intensity level rises. A key word or a non-verbal cue (like putting a hand over your heart to signal that you really empathize with what was just said) can help a lot. Agree on a signal that anyone can use to pause the discussion. Let everyone take a deep breath before moving on to deal with the situation.

EXPLORING THE FILM

GENERAL QUESTIONS

- Name one thing from the film that spoke truth to you. Name one thing said in the film with which you really disagreed.
- How did viewing the film make you feel? How did the various visual styles and genres used by the filmmaker influence how you felt?
- A month from now, what do you think you will remember most from this film and why?
- Write a poem, essay, story, letter, or editorial based on your initial reaction to the film. If you have a chance, put it away until you have had a chance to think about the film for awhile or even watch it again. Then read what you wrote and consider whether your original thoughts or feelings are still true. If things have changed, write about what has changed.

HERITAGE / COMMUNITY – THINKING ABOUT WHERE YOU COME FROM

DISCUSSION OR WRITING PROMPT

- Listen carefully to Thomas' description of "the streets" where he grew up. Notice that he includes both positive and negative. Describe where you live. Identify the good and the bad.

ACTIVITY

- Look over your description. Pick one good thing you can help sustain. Pick one negative thing you could help work to change.

* * *

DISCUSSION OR WRITING PROMPT

- Piri Thomas says, "I learned most of my wisdoms from women...I learned wisdom from the men, too, but just how to be a big mouth macho mistake and violence, that's what I learned. Cuz I came from violence." Who have you learned your wisdoms from? What did they teach? Is there a difference between what you have learned from women and what you have learned from men?

ACTIVITY

- Think of one piece of wisdom you have learned that you consider valuable. Write it down on a piece of paper. You may sign it or leave it anonymous. In a "treasure

chest” collect the papers from everyone in the room. Ask a volunteer to read the collective wisdom in the room. Talk about whether there are any patterns or trends in the collective wisdom. If you wish, share stories about the people from whom the wisdoms came.

* * *

DISCUSSION OR WRITING PROMPT

- As a young man, Piri Thomas struggles with his racial identity. Why was it so important to Piri’s brother Jose to identify as white? Why was it so important for Piri to declare that he was black?

ACTIVITY

- Draw a “coat of arms” or an insignia that represents at least four different core parts of your identity. Explain your drawing to the group. What role does race play in your identity?

* * *

DISCUSSION OR WRITING PROMPT

- Before viewing the film, jot down your general impressions of: prison, gangs, *el barrio*, being “tough”. After viewing the film, discuss whether any of your impressions changed. Did Thomas’ experience give you any new insights? How was his experience different from or similar to your own?

ACTIVITY

- Choose any topic that Thomas addresses in the film. Write a story about that topic. Your story can be fiction or non-fiction.

* * *

DISCUSSION OR WRITING PROMPT

- Piri Thomas says about his experience on the streets, “Hanging around the block is a sort of science. You have a lot to do and a lot of nothin’ to do.” What do you think he means? What is “hanging around” like for you? Are there rules about how to act? How did you learn those rules? Who enforces the rules? Who benefits from the rules? Who suffers because of the rules?

ACTIVITY

- Write a survival manual for your neighborhood. What would a newcomer need to know to survive? What would a newcomer need to know to thrive? As an alternative, think about the different worlds you live in. For example, Thomas talks about living in three worlds: home, school, and street. Write a rulebook for each of the worlds you inhabit. How do the rules differ in each place? Which is the most comfortable for you and why?

* * *

DISCUSSION OR WRITING PROMPT

- As part of the closing poem, Piri Thomas writes, “Do not buy toys for your children, bought at the price of other children.” What kinds of things do you think he has in mind? How do you think the United States demonstrates its concern or care for children? Does the care extend to all children, or do some children seem to be favored more than others? Can you think of a specific example of how your community demonstrates its care or concern for all children? Can you think of a specific example of your community failing to demonstrate its care or concern for all children?

ACTIVITY

- Take your answer to the last question above and brainstorm ways that you could help your community better act on its care and concern for children.
- As an alternative or follow up, take your thinking global. If you could buy one item that would impress your friends, what would it be? Investigate how that item was produced. Where was it made? How much were the workers who made it paid? How much would you have to pay for the item? Who would benefit most if you bought the item?

* * *

DISCUSSION OR WRITING PROMPT

- When Piri Thomas returns to his community to help others avoid some of the mistakes he made, one of the things he tells the young men is, “Guys like you...can do the work that a thousand agencies can’t...because you know the problems.” What problems are in your community that the agencies don’t see or don’t understand?

ACTIVITY

- Brainstorm a list of things you might do to make your community better. Then pick one and map out a plan and timeline to act on it.

* * *

DISCUSSION OR WRITING PROMPT

- Piri Thomas questions the role of prisons in improving people or communities: “Prison, the House of Do-Right, is not a pretty place to be in. Twenty- four hours of constant tensions. So many brothers turning into vegetables or psychopaths.” Do you know people who have been incarcerated? In your opinion, how did their incarceration affect them? After serving time, were they more or less likely to be a positive contributor to your community? What things about their prison experience do you think had the greatest impact on them?

ACTIVITY

- Ask each person to name one thing they would do at every prison to help inmates change for the better. Pick one item from the resulting list and investigate current policy at the prison or jail operating in your community. If the institutions are not currently implementing your suggestion, think about ways that your group could involve your community in establishing a new policy or program.
- As a follow-up, you might consider what kinds of things you could do in your community to make it more likely that people who have served time will be successful when they are released.

* * *

DISCUSSION OR WRITING PROMPT

- Piri Thomas describes the place he was born as, "... a *barrio* where many promises never came to be. Oh say can't you see?" What is the line "Oh say can't you see?" based on and why do you think Thomas uses it?
- What kinds of promises does the United States make to its citizens? In your community, which of those promises tend to come true for most people? Which promises remain unfulfilled for most people? When you answer those questions, is your community like or unlike other communities in your city or state? If there are differences, what do you think accounts for those differences?

ACTIVITY

- Investigate what local politicians or candidates are doing or plan to do to help people in your community. Write a clear statement about what you would like them to do and then arrange for a meeting at which you can present your ideas. Be prepared to let them know what you are willing to do to help.

* * *

SELF-AWARENESS – THINKING ABOUT WHO YOU ARE

DISCUSSION OR WRITING PROMPT

- Poet Piri Thomas begins the film by saying, "Words can be bullets or butterflies." What do you think he means?

ACTIVITY

- List some words that you think of as "butterflies". List some words you think of as "bullets." How do the words in each list make you feel? When you use them, how do you think they make others feel?

* * *

DISCUSSION OR WRITING PROMPT

- In the opening section of the film, Piri Thomas says we are like fingerprints – we all have them, yet each fingerprint is unique. Why might it be important for Thomas to recognize the similarities to and connections he has with others? Why might it be important for him to see himself as unique?

ACTIVITY

- Pick three groups of people (e.g., the people in the room with you, your immediate family, neighbors, people of your race or culture or religion, teammates, etc.) For each group, list the things you have in common (i.e., what is the same about you and this group)? Then list the things that make you different from each group.

* * *

DISCUSSION OR WRITING PROMPT

- Listen carefully to the letter that Thomas writes to the parole board considering his release. When he says he has become a “man”, what kinds of changes do you think he is talking about? What does “being a man” mean to you? What does it mean to Piri Thomas?

ACTIVITY

- Thomas was being judged by a parole board. Does it feel like there are people in your life who are judging you? Who? Think about all the people in your life (parents, teachers, peers, etc.), not just legal judges. Pick one of those people and write a letter to them. Tell them what you think is important to know about you. If you wish, when you are finished, send the letter.

* * *

DISCUSSION OR WRITING PROMPT

- Piri Thomas places a great deal of importance on what one thinks. He wrote: “What better place to begin freedom than in one’s mind.” and “The cruelest prison of all is the prison of the mind.” Discuss what you think Thomas meant. How might one “begin freedom” in one’s mind?

ACTIVITY

- Describe one attitude you have that you think is a strength. Describe one attitude that you wish you could change? Brainstorm things you think might help you build on your strong attitude and change the one(s) that do not serve you well.

* * *

DISCUSSION OR WRITING PROMPT

- What do you think Piri Thomas meant when he said that it is “hard to cry with tears, harder without” and when he describes his tears as “not from the eyes, but from the

soul”? What kinds of things make you want to cry? What do you do when you feel like that?

ACTIVITY

- Look around in your community and at media. What kinds of situations do you see where it is okay for men to cry? What do those situations have in common? What kinds of situations do you see where men are upset but where they do not cry? What do those situations have in common? What is the difference between the two kinds of situations?

* * *

DISCUSSION OR WRITING PROMPT

- In trying to understand some of the reasons that he did what he did, Piri Thomas wrote, “A big hate for anything white grew inside me. I was scared of the whole f***in’ world.” What is the relationship between hate and fear and anger?

ACTIVITY

- On a piece of paper, make two columns. In the column on the left, write down things that make you angry. In the column on the right, list things that you fear. Then look at the two columns and draw lines between any things you see as connected.

Describe the connections.

Note: This activity is best done with advanced groups who are already experienced in doing self-reflection exercises.

* * *

DISCUSSION OR WRITING PROMPT

- Piri Thomas declares, “I will be faithful to me. I will accept the allness that is me, the oneness, the braveness, the cowardness, the strength and weakness.” He also said, “even if society didn’t forgive my past crimes, I determined to forgive myself and start a new life.” What does forgiveness accomplish? How was Thomas faithful to himself?

ACTIVITY

- Think about something you have done that you would like to forgive yourself for. Write a poem about what life would be like if you had never done that thing.

* * *

DISCUSSION OR WRITING PROMPT

- Towards the end of the film, Thomas writes, “Oh gee, if I only had three wishes, like the fairy tales put it down...” What do you think of Piri’s wishes? What are your wishes?

ACTIVITY

- Use Thomas' starting sentence and complete the sentence with your own wishes. Share what you write with the group. How are your wishes similar to and different from others in the group?

* * *

DISCUSSION OR WRITING PROMPT

- In the final line of the film, Piri Thomas says, "Hey World! You don't want to see me. I'll make you see me. You don't want to hear me. I'll make you hear me." How did Piri Thomas make the world hear him? What happened when the world heard him (both to the world and to Thomas)?

ACTIVITY

- Brainstorm a list of all the ways that you could make the world hear you. As you look at the list, answer the following questions:
 - Which would be the most effective and why?
 - Which might get you in trouble and why?
 - Which would make you feel good about yourself and why?
 - Which is the most realistic and why?
 - Is there one thing on the list you could try to do in the next six months?

EXTENSIONS

- After viewing and discussion *Every Child is Born a Poet*, you may want to follow up with one or more of the following:
- Read and discuss Piri Thomas' autobiographical novel, *Down These Mean Streets*.
- In the film, Piri Thomas reflects on the role of writing: "Writing was my best friend" and "For the first time I was aware that I really didn't know myself." Reflect on your own relationship to writing.
- Make an autobiographical film or video and/or document life in your neighborhood.

RESOURCES

ON THE WEB

<http://everychildisbornapoet.com> is the website for the film.

<http://www.cheverote.com/piri.html> is Piri Thomas' official website.

OTHER BOOKS BY PIRI THOMAS

Savior, Savior Hold My Hand. (Doubleday, 1972) Check your library - currently out of print. The sequel to *Down These Mean Streets* about Thomas' life following his release from prison, reintegrating into society, working as a youth violence prevention counselor, and reuniting with his father.

Seven Long Times. (Preager, 1974) Check your library - currently out of print. A detailed account of the time he spent in state prison for armed robbery and attempted murder and the inner journey he made there.

Stories from El Barrio. (Knopf, 1978) Check your library - currently out of print. A collection of short stories about life in East Harlem for "children of all ages," which includes such classics as La Peseta, The Konk, and Amigo Brothers.

OTHER RELATED BOOKS

Hearts and Hands: Creating Community in Violent Times. By Luis J. Rodriguez. (Seven Stories Press, 2003) Luis Rodriguez grew up in the grip of gang brotherhood but ultimately was able to turn his life around. His work as a peacemaker with gangs in Los Angeles and Chicago informs this book, a combination manifesto and memoir that offers both inspiration and a nuts-and-bolts approach to the issue of youth violence.

In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio. By Philippe Bourgois. (Cambridge University Press, 2002) An intimate, graphic and sometimes disturbing study of the lives of five crack addicts/dealers in the 1980's and 1990's in the neighborhood where Piri Thomas grew up. The book also provides excellent background information on "Nuyoricans" (people from Puerto Rico living in New York or the U.S.) and an analysis of the economic pressures young men face in *El Barrio*.

From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity. By Juan Flores. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000) is a series of essays providing a sophisticated analysis of Puerto Rican identity formation through examples in music, literature, architecture and politics.

Manchild in the Promised Land. By Claude Brown (Macmillan, 1965) Another classic coming-of-age autobiographical novel, this of an African-American growing up in Central Harlem in the 1940s and 1950s. Alongside the vivid portrayal of children, hardworking parents, hustlers, drug dealers, prostitutes, and numbers runners is the story of Brown's incarceration in juvenile facilities and his emancipation.

Fist Stick Knife Gun: A Personal History of Violence in America. By Geoffrey Canada (Beacon Press, 1996) The issue of ghetto violence and how to address it is intimately explored by an African-American who grew up in the Bronx and went on to found the Harlem Children's Zone, Harlem Peacemakers Program, and the Community Pride Initiative, among other innovative programs.



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MCMOI campaigns are managed by Outreach Extensions, a national consulting firm that specializes in comprehensive, high-profile educational and community outreach campaigns for media projects. Please visit the MCMOI Web site at www.aecf.org/initiatives/mc/communications/mcmoi/ for more information and community-use materials for these exciting programs. Visit the Reentry Web site at: www.reentrymediaoutreach.org.

For more information on the Reentry National Media Outreach Campaign, please contact:



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