

# CITY OF TREES

DISCUSSION GUIDE



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## SYNOPSIS



Since 1990, nonprofit Washington Parks & People (WPP) has tried to reduce poverty and violence in Washington, D.C. neighborhoods by improving parks. At the height of the recession in 2009, the organization received a stimulus grant to create a “green” job-training program in communities hardest hit. They had two years to help unemployed people find jobs and improve parks in their neighborhoods.

Steve Coleman, a grassroots environmental leader who directs the organization, is tasked with using the grant to hire 150 unemployed residents to care for the city’s most blighted urban parks and improve upon the soft skills required to get a job. For Charles Holcomb, the paycheck offers him a chance to give his newborn daughter the life he never had. For Michael Samuels, the job training is a first step forward after a drug conviction marred his employment record. For James Magruder, the program offers a chance to prove that his neighborhood roots position him as an unsung leader.

What sounds like a simple goal — putting people back to work by planting trees — becomes complicated by community tensions and a fast-approaching deadline before the grant money runs out. Filmed in an unflinching and compelling verité approach over the course of more than two years, *City of Trees* thrusts viewers into the inspiring but messy world of job training and the paradoxes changemakers face in urban communities everyday.

# THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY



*"For every problem discussed in Washington, a thread runs out to a city or a state, or another continent, and at the end of that thread is a human being to whom the problem is not facts or figures, but life itself."*

— Robert Drew,  
early pioneer of cinema verité movement

In 2010, we were still in the thick of the recession and our city was in a crisis. We were two young, white brothers with recently-acquired bachelor's degrees from good private universities. We had just moved to Washington, D.C. to pursue careers as filmmakers and started a small documentary production company. Though we were born in DC, we grew up just outside the city in Bethesda, Maryland. In becoming reconnected to the city, we were particularly troubled by the way the recession disproportionately impacted communities of color and people of lesser means than ourselves. For them, the recession seemed to exacerbate pain, suffering, and struggle that had already been in place for decades. We were inspired by people and programs working to try and address these massive and complex issues. But we were also troubled by the lack of storytelling about these efforts, and how what did exist felt reductive, prescriptive and typically from the perspective of people in power who looked like us. In starting Meridian Hill Pictures, we were interested in telling different kinds of stories. We wanted to make films that posed unanswered questions, leaving room for audiences to wrestle with complexities and empathize with experiences different from their own.

But we had no idea where to start.



We had no track record as filmmakers, no portfolio, and no income. We still decided we needed a place to work. We heard that the Josephine Butler Parks Center had coworking space for rent. We made a passionate pitch to Steve Coleman, the manager of the building and director of nonprofit Washington Parks & People, that we would pay our bills on time and get involved in the building's community. For some reason, he believed us.

Within days of meeting, Steve mentioned that his nonprofit had just received a large federal stimulus grant to create a green job training program in DC called the DC Green Corps. WPP had two years to train over 100 District residents struggling with long-term unemployment. Working primarily African American communities, Steve wanted to help people who had major impediments to employability, people who were desperately trying to find work and leverage the training to better their lives. It was an ambitious undertaking, with a tight timeline and the intense scrutiny of the federal stimulus. Steve invited us to check out the Green Corps' first site, where they were turning a vacant alley in the nearby Columbia Heights neighborhood into a community garden. We had time on our hands, so we showed up with our cameras.

That Saturday morning, we got absorbed in the world of the Green Corps. We listened intently to Steve talk about the process of turning a blighted piece of land into a vibrant community garden. We randomly met trainee Charles Holcomb, who spoke poetically and with deep emotion about the program's impact on his life. We were impressed by the humanity, openness and vulnerability with which people opened up to our camera. We took the day's footage back to the studio and edited it together into a 9-minute short film we called *Community Harvest*.

We were proud of *Community Harvest*, but we also felt like it suffered from the same kinds of simplistic storytelling we wanted to challenge. We quickly realized the garden was just a small piece of a much more complex story. We wanted to go further and deeper than where most nonprofit storytelling often ends.

We spent the next several months getting to know the people in the program better. We became fascinated with their hopes and struggles. Thanks to the stimulus

grant, Steve could take big risks to serve community needs with an ambitious program like the Green Corps. Thanks to the stable paycheck, Charles could provide for his newborn baby daughter and do something good for the community. Their ambitions, and idealism pulled us in. We wanted them to succeed. But we could also feel the intense stakes building, and tensions of the real world standing to threaten their dreams.

We had never made a feature-length film before, but we knew the process would need to start with building firm trust. As a first step, we began to explore participatory methods to help the Green Corps trainees and staff tell the story from their own perspective. Thankfully, Steve and the Washington Parks & People staff were extremely receptive and supportive of the idea.

We facilitated a three-month participatory filmmaking project with the second cohort of the Green Corps as part of their job training. We collaborated with the trainees to create four short documentaries, each focused on a particular theme: *public health, environmental justice, jobs and economic needs, youth and education*. The trainees conducted interviews, filmed their own work in the field, and made editorial decisions on what to include and exclude. We tried to give the



trainees as much agency as possible in the storytelling process. Their short films premiered in a big event at the AFI Silver Theater in Silver Spring, MD. As they took the stage, they felt pride in telling their own story. The films were successful in breaking down some of the barriers between us and the trainees. As a result of the process, we grew to care deeply about everyone and gained a deeper level of trust. When we wanted to go further in exploring the story over a longer period of time, they better understood our process of inquiry and felt more comfortable letting camera's into their lives.

As we started filming more intensively in people's personal and professional lives, we began to form a relationship with Chicago's legendary Kartemquin Films. For more than 50 years, Kartemquin has built an inspiring body of work through visually documenting people's lived experiences, paying particular attention to the way raw moments reveal new and important aspects of life. The filmmakers at Kartemquin helped us to understand how to form ethical relationships with people in the film. They constantly reminded us that if we focused on telling this story with honesty, intimacy and integrity, we could dive deeply into thorny and complex issues without doing harm to the people assigning their trust in us. Thankfully, people like Charles, Steve, Karen, James and Michael again understood and embraced this idea. They recognized that through being vulnerable and allowing us into their lives, we could all collectively tell a far more impactful and nuanced story than the more common forms of simplistic social change storytelling.

This understanding became critical as we entered the last six months of the stimulus grant. While the participants had great appreciation for the impact of the program, the end of the grant created great stresses in people's lives. We wanted to let the story unfold and make sure we captured each person's fullest subjective truth to the best of our abilities. As interpersonal and community-level struggles became more pronounced, we realized we were witnessing an important, and often untold, window into the process of social changemaking. We didn't want to make any judgments and wanted to remain open to how the events in people's lives might change, so that the film would reflect the complexities of real life. We didn't set out to make a film explicitly about race, class, power,

or justice, but when these hard questions emerged when filming, we didn't want to turn off the camera.

In the push for social, economic and environmental justice, we believe empathy plays a critical role. No remedy is perfect, and most are messy. Empathy means coming face-to-face with real people, real situations, no matter how complicated they are. The goal of a film like *City of Trees* is not to reduce any problem down to one simple solution or the actions of any one person. Rather, we hope that *City of Trees* helps create the space to navigate some of the contradictions, complexities, and sensitivities, that emerge when different people try to work together within societal conditions and systems toward a common goal. In a democracy, we need these kinds of stories to deepen public consciousness and bring together diverse people into productive discourse.

We hope the film presents a way for people to talk about difficult questions in an open dialogue. When you watch *City of Trees*, we want you to make meaningful connections to situations you have experienced, relate to people who feel similar to you, and step into the shoes of someone who is different from you. We hope that through watching the film, you can better understand the complex factors facing the people in the film and gain new insight into how they may affect your own life. Perhaps most importantly, we want you to have the room to think and feel for yourself.

It's been nearly six years since that day we first walked into the Josephine Butler Parks Center. We have endless gratitude for everyone who allowed us into their lives to make *City of Trees*. Thanks to their courage for sharing their story, the film has helped to spark countless dynamic and spirited conversations across the country. And thanks to you, these conversations continue on.

**Filmmakers:** Brandon Kramer & Lance Kramer

**Participants:** Charles Holcomb, Michael Samuels  
Steve Coleman, James Magruder  
Brian Rodgers, Karen Loeschner

# HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE



*City of Trees* has inspired audiences across the country to have deep, impassioned, far-reaching, and often-difficult conversations covering a wide range of themes and issues. This guide is a tool to help stimulate constructive dialogue on the issues that impact the lives of diverse people in all kinds of communities.

We suggest being clear with audiences at the onset of a dialogue and setting up a **frame, context** and **purpose**. Samples are included with each theme. Keep in mind that any single question can lead to ongoing discussion and commentary. We suggest leaving ample time at the end of the dialogue to ensure the audience can suggest meaningful next steps after the screening. Thinking in advance about the available time, the needs of the audience and future action points can help to create the most meaningful and memorable experience.

We understand that *City of Trees* presents many difficult issues playing out in people's lives. We understand that the film does not neatly tie a bow around these issues, nor does the film tell you exactly how to feel about people or the issues. The film was consciously made this way. We want to respect our audience's space to internalize, wrestle with, and make connections with people's lived experiences. We want these discussions to be diverse, insightful, deep, and generative of new ideas and revelations, rather than prescribing how anyone should think or act.



# DISCUSSION THEMES



From dozens of screenings throughout the film's initial release in 2015-2016, we identified five major themes that commonly emerged during audience discussions, surveys, partner feedback and reflections from participants in the film. Together, they make up this curated bank of questions to shape group conversation. They are just a starting point. We encourage you to edit, customize and tailor the questions to best meet the needs of your audience.

For smaller groups, we suggest printing the specific Discussion Theme page and distributing to participants.

## DISCUSSION THEME 1: PERSONAL STORIES

## DISCUSSION THEME 2: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

## DISCUSSION THEME 3: ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

## DISCUSSION THEME 4: EMPLOYMENT BARRIERS

## DISCUSSION THEME 5: RACIAL JUSTICE



# PERSONAL STORIES

*"This handsomely shot story makes its viewers intimate observers of the emotional journeys experienced by both the project leaders and the hired staff who passionately grab at this opportunity to improve their lives."*

— Chris Haley,

Director of the Study of the Legacy of Slavery in Maryland, Maryland State Archives

## EVALUATE

- What stood out to you about the way personal stories were shared in the film?
- How do you think the filmmakers and participants created sufficient mutual trust to share personal stories?
- What are the benefits of exploring complex issues through personal stories? What are the dangers?

## RELATE

- How did you feel while you watched the film?
- Who did you relate to most closely in the film? Who felt most different from you?
- How are personal stories told in your own community?

## REFLECT

- After watching the film, do you think differently about how personal stories are told in your community?
- Do you think personal storytelling around social issues can have an impact in your community?
- What are the biggest hurdles to overcome in terms of how personal stories are told in your community?

## CONTEXT

People doing social change work are under constant pressure to demonstrate 'measurable impact' on those they serve and articulate how they are using precious resources to make the world a measurably better place. While this movement can create a focus on accountability and data in the push toward stronger programs and services, does it leave enough room to talk about people? In this conversation, we will discuss how personal stories factor into the way people learn about changemaking efforts.

## SUGGESTED READINGS

[Article] "What Authentic Storytelling Means for Us" by Lance Kramer, National Alliance for Media Arts & Culture (NAMAC) Blog

[namac.org/authentic-storytelling-means-us/](https://namac.org/authentic-storytelling-means-us/)

[Article] "Doc Ethics: Let Core Values Drive Your Decisions" by Gordon Quinn, International Documentary Association (IDA) Documentary Magazine

[documentary.org/column/doc-ethics-let-core-values-drive-your-decisions](https://documentary.org/column/doc-ethics-let-core-values-drive-your-decisions)

## DISCUSSION THEME 2

# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

*“City of Trees is honest. It is real. It explores the messy truths embedded in all fights for environmental and social justice. The film offers a window into the nuances, hopes and fears that play out whenever well-intentioned people try to make things better in struggling urban communities.”*

— Van Jones,

CNN political commentator, *NYTimes* bestselling author

### EVALUATE

- What stood out to you about the way different communities interacted with each other in the film?
- What factors felt most significant in the community engagement process portrayed in the film?
- What did you learn about community engagement through watching the film?

### RELATE

- How have you participated in community engagement efforts where you live? Or in someone else's community?
- When was it successful?
- When did you face challenges?

### REFLECT

- What makes a community engagement effort effective?
- What factors lead communities to feel empowered?
- How can different stakeholders in a community work collaboratively together toward common goals?

### CONTEXT

In *City of Trees*, the story does not shy away from moments of struggle and challenge, particularly when it comes to the way different urban communities engage with one another. In this conversation, we will discuss the opportunities and challenges that can emerge when different communities attempt to work together toward common goals.

### SUGGESTED READINGS

[Article] “In D.C. Neighborhoods, Rebuilding the Environment — and Residents’ Lives”  
by Rebecca Sheir, WAMU

[wamu.org/programs/metro\\_connection/15/10/16/in\\_troubled\\_dc\\_neighborhoods\\_rebuilding\\_the\\_environment\\_and\\_residents\\_lives](https://wamu.org/programs/metro_connection/15/10/16/in_troubled_dc_neighborhoods_rebuilding_the_environment_and_residents_lives)

[Book] *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*  
by Paulo Freire

[politics-prose.com/book/9780826412768](https://politics-prose.com/book/9780826412768)



# ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

*“Beautiful and engaging. The irony of the Green Corps program’s struggles is the film’s message of hope we see in glimpses of community resilience and the empathy the film inspires for its central actors. **City of Trees** offers a great ‘new narrative’ to counter the conventional formula of the traditional success story and explores different dimensions of social and environmental justice.”*

— Thomas Walker,

PhD Director of the Environmental Studies Program, Goucher College

## EVALUATE

- What environmental rights do you think communities should be entitled to?
- Are there moments where you feel that people in the film did not experience these rights?
- What did you learn from the way the communities depicted in the film discussed their environmental needs and rights?

## RELATE

- What does environmental justice mean to you?
- Do you feel that people in your community experience environmental justice?
- Are there active efforts in your community to create a more environmentally just atmosphere?

## REFLECT

- Do you feel differently about environmental justice after watching the film?
- Do you feel people have a responsibility to the environmental well-being of other communities besides their own?
- After viewing the film, what do you think can be done to ensure people in your own community and others can experience environmental justice?

## CONTEXT

*City of Trees* explores environmental justice — the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the environment — from a human perspective. The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) states that this goal will be achieved when everyone enjoys the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards, and equal access to the decision-making process to have a healthy environment in which to live, learn and work. In this conversation, we will discuss how environmental justice is explored in the film and how it might help you think about your own lives, work, and communities.

## SUGGESTED READINGS

[Article] “City of Trees: an urgent story about reentry and environmental justice”  
by Mary-Ellen Sprenkel, Huffington Post  
[huffingtonpost.com/the-corps-network/city-of-trees-an-urgent-s\\_b\\_9729862.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/the-corps-network/city-of-trees-an-urgent-s_b_9729862.html)

[Book] “The Green Collar Economy”  
by Van Jones  
[politics-prose.com/book/9780061650765](https://politics-prose.com/book/9780061650765)

## DISCUSSION THEME 4

# EMPLOYMENT BARRIERS

*“A subtly powerful, insightful, and at times poignant social and environmental documentary. **City of Trees** so brilliantly succeeds not because it is an environmental film (though it clearly is) but rather because, as a terrific labor film, it uses an environmental program as a prism into the interconnected intricacies of work, race, class, urban space, male breadwinner gender roles and community politics.”*

— Jason Kozlowski,

Labor Historian and Labor Educator, West Virginia University Institute for Labor Studies & Research

### EVALUATE

- In the film, what are the barriers and challenges faced by long-term unemployed people and job seekers?
- What kinds of support did you observe job seekers needing most in the film?
- What kinds of ideas did you have about unemployed people and job seekers before watching the film? Did the film change any of your perceptions?

### RELATE

- Have you (or has anyone close to you) ever been out of work for an extended period of time? What was it like for you?
- What resources were available to you?
- Have you participated in a job training program or similar service designed to help you get back into the workforce?

### REFLECT

- How can employers help address the barriers that exist for people facing long-term employment?
- How can communities help each other to overcome stereotypes and stigmas associated with long-term unemployment?
- How might you be able to contribute to employment opportunities in your community?

### CONTEXT

*City of Trees* offers a lens into labor issues — particularly long-term unemployment and the world of job training — through the personal experiences of job training participants like Michael, staff members like Charles and James, and leadership like Steve and Karen who run programs designed to serve them. In this conversation, we will discuss how labor is explored in the film and how it might help you think about your own lives, work, and communities.

### SUGGESTED READINGS

[Article] “City of Trees provides a look into the promise of urban green jobs programs”

by Jason Kozlowski, *In These Times*

[inthesetimes.com/working/entry/19081/city-of-trees-review-documentary-washington-dc](https://inthesetimes.com/working/entry/19081/city-of-trees-review-documentary-washington-dc)

[Article] “Long-Term Unemployment: The Economy’s Secret Cancer”

by Andrew Soergel, *US News*

[usnews.com/news/articles/2016-06-09/long-term-unemployment-the-economys-secret-cancer](https://usnews.com/news/articles/2016-06-09/long-term-unemployment-the-economys-secret-cancer)



# RACIAL JUSTICE

*“An expertly crafted, intimately rendered, verité documentary...the film closely examines how race and class difference functions, and the real tensions between wanting to change and improve the environment with the urgent need to secure good jobs for one’s family, safety and well-being.”*

— Giovanna Chesler,

Director of Film & Video Studies Program, George Mason University

## EVALUATE

- What stood out to you most about the way race was explored in *City of Trees*?
- Did you feel that race affected the way people in the film made decisions or navigated conflict?
- Did the film challenge — or affirm — any of your assumptions or previously held ideas about race?

## RELATE

- When thinking about your own workplace and community where you live, can you relate to any of the experiences people in the film faced?
- Does the film make you think about how race impacts your workplace or community?

## REFLECT

- After watching the film, do you feel differently about how race impacts your workplace or community?
- After watching the film, do you feel differently about how race may impact change efforts that you are a part of?
- What obstacles and opportunities do differences in race present when attempting to work together toward social change?

## CONTEXT

*City of Trees* explores the dynamics, opportunities and challenges that emerge when people of different race, ethnicities and class working together to address complex socio-economic and environmental issues in their communities. The story in *City of Trees* is told from multiple perspectives, such as an African American community leader (Brenda), white nonprofit leaders (Steve and Karen), an African American trainee (Michael), African American staff (Brian) and community members. In this conversation, we will discuss your own reactions to the way race is explored in the film, and how it might help you think about your own lives, work, and communities.

## SUGGESTED READINGS

[Article] “Navigating the River: The Hidden Colonialism of Documentary”  
by Edwin Martinez, International Documentary Association (IDA) Documentary Magazine  
[documentary.org/column/navigating-river-hidden-colonialism-documentary](https://documentary.org/column/navigating-river-hidden-colonialism-documentary)

[Book] “The New Jim Crow”  
by Michelle Alexander  
[politics-prose.com/book/9781595586438](https://politics-prose.com/book/9781595586438)

## KEY CONCEPTS



### URBAN FORESTRY

*"We are an urban area, and yet we do have forests here. People think that's kind of funny, you think of trees being out in the country or in the suburbs. But we still have the same needs to take care of our trees."*

— Karen (at 4min)

The field of urban forestry covers the management, restoration, and improvement of urban forest ecosystems. People working in the field encourage and promote the creation of healthier, more livable urban environments across the nation.

Learn more: [fs.fed.us/ucf](https://fs.fed.us/ucf)

### AMERICAN RECOVERY & REINVESTMENT ACT (THE 'STIMULUS')

*"This is too important, for us to say, because of one grant, from one federal agency ending, that we all walk away and say, 'have a nice life'."*

— Steve (at 48min)

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) was signed into law by President Barack Obama on February 17th, 2009. A response to the Great Recession, ARRA's primary objectives were to immediately save and create jobs and provide temporary relief programs for those most affected by the recession. The Act also included measures to modernize the nation's infrastructure, enhance energy



independence, expand educational opportunities, preserve and improve affordable health care, provide tax relief, and protect those in greatest need. The Washington Parks & People DC Green Corps was funded through a \$2.7 million ARRA grant from the USDA Forest Service (\$2.4 million was awarded to Washington Parks & People, \$300,000 was awarded to city partners).

Learn more: [treasury.gov/initiatives/recovery/Pages](https://treasury.gov/initiatives/recovery/Pages)

## WASHINGTON PARKS & PEOPLE

*"Parks & People has been around for a quarter century now, and we have always believed that it's not about the parks, it's about the people. We're here because we believe that the stuff we're doing with trees can really matter in the life of our community and it can make a difference in your life."*

— Steve (at 1hr 10min)

Started in Washington, D.C. in 1990, Washington Parks & People is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that mobilizes public lands and waters for broad community revitalization through partnership, innovation, discovery, and workforce development. WPP exists to grow city-wide park-based community health and vitality. WPP's headquarters are based at the Far NE DC's Riverside Center and NW DC's Josephine Butler Parks Center.

Learn more: [washingtonparks.net](https://washingtonparks.net)

## DC GREEN CORPS

*"We're looking for people for whom this program has the biggest likelihood of making a major impact in their life. And we made a specific commitment that we're going to work with people who have had a hard time getting a job. We said we're going to work with ex-offenders, with a variety of people who have really struggled."*

— Steve (at 4min)

The DC Green Corps training program is a program of Washington Parks & People. The program uses parks as a base of countering poverty and environmental injustice, offering entry-level workforce development in urban forestry, storm water mitigation, green infrastructure, urban agriculture & related fields. Based at the Marvin Gaye Community Greening Center in the Watts Branch subwatershed of the Anacostia River, the program offers a gateway to different green career tracks in urban and community forestry and forest-based ecosystem and watershed restoration. The program works with underserved communities across the city. The vast majority of trainees come to the program with a record of previous incarceration. Initially started under the ARRA grant, the program has since graduated more than 170 people from 12 cohorts (as of the summer of 2016). The program is a member of The Corps Network and is a certified part of the President's 21st Century Conservation Corps.

Learn more: <https://www.washingtonparks.net/programs/green-corps/>



## USDA FOREST SERVICE

A multi-faceted federal agency within the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Forest Service manages and protects the nation's 154 national forests and 20 national grasslands. The agency's mission is to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations.

Learn more: [fs.fed.us](https://fs.fed.us)

## OXON RUN PARK

*"We're in Oxon Run Park. It's located in Southeast Washington, D.C. It's the largest municipal city park. For this park to be this big, it's really under-used and under-served. There's no real programming over here. There's no real inspiration for people to come in. One of our things is to come over here and get this park active."*

— Brian (at 10min)

Located in Ward 8, Oxon Run Park is a large stream valley park located along Mississippi Avenue in the Washington Highlands neighborhood of Southeast Washington, D.C. The park is comprised of 126 acres of wetlands and forest in the surrounding urban environment.

Learn more: [dpr.dc.gov](https://dpr.dc.gov)

## WARD 8

Located in the historic Anacostia neighborhood in Southeast Washington, D.C., Ward 8 is the oldest ward, founded as Uniontown in 1854. The population of Ward 8 is mainly comprised of African Americans and is concentrated southeast of the Anacostia River, about four miles from the White House.

Learn more: [planning.dc.gov/page/about-ward-8](https://planning.dc.gov/page/about-ward-8)

## GRANTS

*"We've been getting really slammed by funders, especially grants we had been counting on. We are going to have a cash crunch and not all of us are going to be able to continue right away on this."*

— Steve (at 15min)

Grants are non-repayable funds or products given by one party, often the government, a corporation, foundation or trust, to a recipient, such as a nonprofit entity, educational institution, business or an individual, to fund a specific purpose or project. Washington Parks & People continued the DC Green Corps program after their stimulus grant expired, through a combination of smaller grants, contributions, contracts, partner support and earned income.

Learn more: [foundationcenter.org/find-funding](https://foundationcenter.org/find-funding)



## JOB TRAINING

*"Now I can apply for tree companies, or maybe I could be an apprentice for an arborist, because now I've got a little bit of knowledge in urban forestry. I just want to get a job. Money is kind of tight, the economy's kind of messed up. I just put in my applications hoping that somebody will call back before I finish the program."*

— Michael (at 46min)

Job training programs often are designed to help job-seekers with knowledge about hard and soft skills relating to a new position or field, opportunities to put new skills into practice, meet potential employers, practice interviewing and receive feedback on their performance to strengthen their job-seeking. These programs are often designed to assist workers who have been laid off or are about to be laid off.

Learn more: [doleta.gov](http://doleta.gov)

## GREEN JOBS

*"I never knew how much I had to live for, what I was putting on the line. I never knew it, until I got into a job where I saw how much they cared so much about the earth. If they care so much about the earth, why don't I care about myself as much as they care about planting a tree."*

— Charles (at 9min)

According to the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), a green job is "work in agricultural, manufacturing, research and development, administrative, and service activities that contribute substantially to preserving or restoring environmental quality." These include jobs that help to protect ecosystems and biodiversity; reduce energy, materials, and water consumption; and minimize generation of all forms of waste and pollution. Many of Green Corps graduates have found work in urban forestry, landscaping, park revitalization, urban agriculture, green infrastructure, and related trades. However, lasting employment remains a challenge for entry-level positions.

Learn more: [bls.gov/green](http://bls.gov/green)

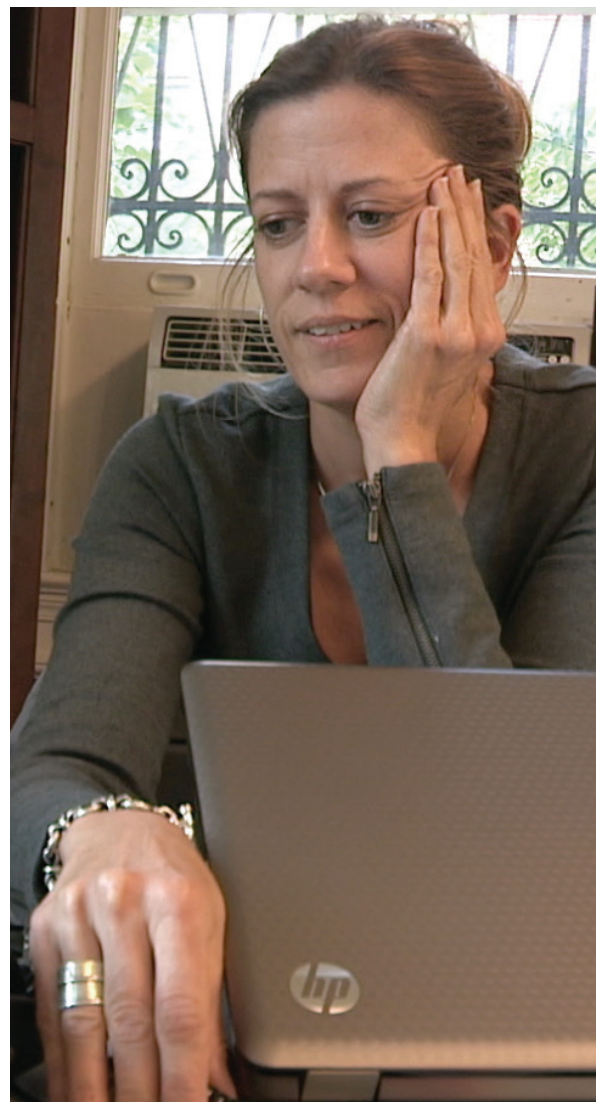
## ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

*"There is no reason why this neighborhood deserves any less standards than any other place in the city, and that's why we're here."*

— Steve (at 9min)

Refers to "the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies," according to the US Environmental Protection Agency.

Learn more: [epa.gov/environmentaljustice](http://epa.gov/environmentaljustice)





## RETURNING CITIZENS

*"I just lost everything in 15-30 minutes. They wound up sending me to a federal penitentiary. Now that I'm back home, I'm trying to prove that I'm not just getting released from prison, I'm trying to start my life back over."*

— Michael (at 13min)

A returning citizen is someone who is reintegrating into society after incarceration. Returning citizens are one of the most marginalized groups in DC. They are often discriminated against in the employment process because of their criminal records, therefore finding it extremely difficult to get back on their feet.

Learn more: [orca.dc.gov](http://orca.dc.gov)

## ANACOSTIA RIVER

Approximately 8.7 miles (14 km) long, the river flows from Prince George's County in Maryland into Washington, D.C., where it empties into the Potomac River. It is sometimes called "D.C.'s forgotten river" due to the heavy pollution and lesser investment along its banks. In recent years, private organizations, local businesses, and governments have made joint efforts to reduce its pollution levels in order to protect the ecologically valuable Anacostia watershed.

Learn more: [anacostiaws.org](http://anacostiaws.org)

## JOSEPHINE BUTLER PARKS CENTER

Operated by Washington Parks & People as a community-based "greenhouse" for DC's parks and public spaces, the Parks Center houses community-based nonprofit organizations, including: Meridian Hill Pictures, Gala Hispanic Theatre, Washington Concert Opera, and Young Playwright's Theater. Earned income from the site covers all of WPP's core carrying costs and some costs of the DC Green Corps.

Learn more:  
[washingtoparks.net/josephine-butler-parks-center](http://washingtoparks.net/josephine-butler-parks-center)

## CAPITOL HILL BID

Capitol Hill Business Improvement District (BID) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to strengthening the Capitol Hill neighborhood by creating a cleaner and safer place to live, work, and conduct the business of our nation's capital. Charles is hired by Capitol Hill BID at the end of the film.

Learn more: [capitolhillbid.org](http://capitolhillbid.org)

## SO OTHERS MIGHT EAT (SOME)

An interfaith, community-based organization, So Others Might Eat (SOME) strives to meet the immediate daily needs of the poor and homeless in the nation's capital with food, clothing, and health care. SOME tries to break the cycle of homelessness by offering services, such as affordable housing, job training, addiction treatment, and counseling to the poor, the elderly, and individuals with mental illness. Michael is hired by SOME at the end of the film.

Learn more: [some.org](http://some.org)



# POTENTIAL AUDIENCES



## URBAN FORESTRY PRACTITIONERS

*City of Trees* explores the complexities of how people and communities interact with urban trees and green spaces. The field of urban forestry is becoming increasingly focused on how to relate with people and the way they intersect with the needs and care of trees in an urban city. Community-based nonprofits, civic organizations and city agencies supporting thousands of our nation's trees, parks and public green spaces will find the film to be a valuable tool in launching dialogues about their own local efforts.

## FUNDERS + NONPROFIT STAFF

The initial four cohorts of the Washington Parks & People DC Green Corps was funded through a federal stimulus grant. *City of Trees* examines some of the intricacies of managing grant-funded social change programs. The film provides a people-focused story for funders to reflect on the impact of their grantmaking and how to best design funding models to support social changemakers and meet community needs.

## PUBLIC AGENCIES

City and federal employees and agencies tasked with maintaining programs, services and spaces to serve the public good (i.e. local Parks & Recreation Departments, State Foresters, National Park Service and USDA Forest Service) will find a story about the impact of their work on a local level. The film helps to provide a reminder to public servants of their accountability to community stakeholders, and a window into the complexities of managing the range of local partnerships required to create change on a community-based level.



## GREEN COLLAR EMPLOYERS

A majority of the work performed by trainees in the DC Green Corps is focused on caring for trees and the landscaping of public spaces. The film examines questions of access into the new green economy for lower-income minority Americans, particularly the opportunities and challenges for marginalized Americans to enter the emerging green economy. The film can help companies and professions in fields including arborists, foresters, green architects & builders, landscape designers, sustainability coordinators and urban/regional planners to think about barriers to entry in their fields. Those who practice the design of outdoor environments, particularly parks and gardens, can also use *City of Trees* as a case study in the impact of tree planting and care in underserved areas.

## HUMAN RESOURCES + UNEMPLOYMENT SUPPORT

In *City of Trees*, each one of the trainees experiences various struggles in their journey to re-enter the workforce. Many job-seekers, especially in cities, find that they are marginalized and face discrimination as a result of being out of the workforce for a long period of time, because of their criminal record, age, race, or a variety of other factors. The film can help employers think about new ways to view and engage with people who have faced employment struggles and how to offer productive second chances and support to those who seek work and want to get back on their feet. People who are struggling to find their footing in today's economic unrest will also find personal stories in the film whose experience may be relatable to their own. The film can engage people who have struggled through personal employment crises, connecting with the stories of people who have attempted to defy and overcome major employment and life hurdles.

## NEIGHBORHOOD + COMMUNITY GROUPS

The film explores the challenges of community development and organizing in an honest way that does not avoid hard and messy truths. People working to better communities often struggle with finding genuine and meaningful ways to connect with communities, especially if they are different from their own. Neighborhood, community and faith-based groups are often the most basic unit of organization in many communities. These kinds of formal and informal community structures can serve as impactful hosts for screenings to discuss issues facing residents on a local level, as witnessed in scenes like the park dialogues in the film.





## FILM STUDENTS

*City of Trees* is made in an observational, cinema verité style while also employing a participatory approach to build trust with the film's participants. The film does not include any narration, archival material and has minimal title cards in an attempt to place as much focus as possible on the authentic and personal stories of the characters. The film employs this type of storytelling approach while also exploring a range of complex social issues. The film navigates a range of ethical issues that documentary filmmakers often face when telling someone else's story from an outside perspective.

## PUBLIC POLICY EXPERTS

Amidst the robust public policy dialogue surrounding issues explored in the film, the film can connect with audiences across the full political spectrum, particularly those who have closely followed local and national efforts to rebuild America's economy. As the film does not advocate for a particular position on any of the issues and remains focused on the stories of individual people rather than policies, the film can serve as a neutral, yet provocative, meeting ground for people of differing mindsets. The film can bring people of differing opinions together to engage in substantive dialogue centered on collaboration and cooperative solutions to economic recovery and future prosperity.

## UNIVERSITY STUDENTS + PROFESSORS

People on college campuses will engage with the film's social, political, economic and historical themes. Historians, sociologists and anthropologists will appreciate the film's complex presentation and study of the relationship of urban communities to public green spaces. Environmental studies students will relate to the film's examination of the human side of environmental justice and how public agencies and green organizations have an effect on the outcome of environmental efforts. Economics and labor students will appreciate the film's examination of a workforce development program and economic stimulus grant.

## K-12 EDUCATORS

*City of Trees* examines an array of social, political, economic, and historical issues, such as: the green economy, urban communities, unemployment, race and race relations, environmental justice, returning citizens, and social justice, among many others. K-12 educators (particularly high school) will find the film serves as a relatable resource for jump-starting discussions in the classroom about contemporary issues in America. The film is an accessible entry point for students through following the stories of real people, rather than through charts, maps, 'experts' and statistics.



## AUDIENCE REACTIONS



"*City of Trees* was a real depiction of the difficulties nonprofits face when trying to make a difference. The audience was able to relate to the lives of the main characters and see themselves in the struggles and successes of each person."

— Glenn Wilson

President/Cofounder, Communities First, Inc.

"I showed *City of Trees* to my freshmen class and they were touched by the film. They were particularly interested in the struggle for sustainable employment. It felt beneficial for the students to learn about people who live in communities far different from their own and still care that their communities have green spaces."

— Lillian Walker-Shelton

Discover Instructor, Marymount University

"*City of Trees* opened up a discussion about the relationship between urban residents and their parks. Can planting trees improve community engagement and participation in their own neighborhoods? I think the film and discussion got the students at the screening very interested and invested in the link between social justice and environmental sustainability in a way that a lecture or book could not."

— Jeanne Haffner

Urban Landscape Studies Fellow, Dumbarton Oaks



"*City of Trees* is thought-provoking and genuine. I particularly like the rough edges of the film, and that the ending is not sugar-coated. The documentation of Washington Parks & People accurately shows how difficult it is to achieve lasting impact with even the most well meaning objectives and a totally dedicated staff. This film is a real case study for any organization setting out to make a social impact." — **Chaz Kerschner**

"I appreciate how the film depicts plenty of tensions — just like real life. When watching *City of Trees* one is both moved by and frustrated with the limitations so many people face, and the difficulties to move beyond our zones of comfort." — **Tom Burkhardt**

"I love this film. The five years and 275 hours of filming that it took to make this film speaks to the tenacity of the Kramer brothers' drive to tell authentic stories from an observational point of view. It has left a strong imprint on my thinking about poverty, opportunity, community, urban trauma, nonprofits and the power of nature." — **Connie Chang**

"I have lived in DC since the early 60s. I was blown away by *City of Trees*. The film speaks directly and honestly to housing, homelessness, jobs and job training. The filmmakers went to the ground roots of so many of these vital structural issues and life situations. My sincere gratitude to the many people involved in this film. I will be thinking and talking about the experience for years to come." — **Tish Gardner**

"The film told a story that made me reflect on my own life and all that I should be thankful for, but often take for granted. I enjoyed the panel discussion and audience participation because it carried the story to a new level. I will now see the "trees" in a new light — not just as the shade and beauty they provide — but of the story they tell. Thank you for allowing me to think outside of my rural neighborhood!" — **Kathy MacAdams**

"The film gives people a chance to understand the deep emotions that stir the minds of people less lucky than we are." — **Luigi De Luca**

"*City of Trees* is awesome! Among other things, the film reminds me of issues inherent in global development practice including questions around local agency + community involvement." — **Shardul Oza**

"It is absolutely amazing the amount of time and effort the filmmakers put into this film over the past five years and it poured through on the screen. I have been talking to everyone I know — patients, staff, friends — about the film. The most incredible aspect to this entire process was how they spent so much time collecting raw footage with the hope that a story would come through, and in the end pulled together such an amazing story. The ability of the film to engage the audience, tell a very personal story and at the same time make bold statements about our society, culture and country was captured perfectly." — **Kevin Bunin**

"Seriously, such a great film. So glad this project came to fruition and can't wait to share it with my coworkers in our job training program." — **Janelle Mackereth**





# CONTINUE THE DIALOGUE



## WEBSITES

[cityoftreesfilm.com](http://cityoftreesfilm.com)  
[meridianhillpictures.com](http://meridianhillpictures.com)  
[washingtonparks.net](http://washingtonparks.net)

## NEWSLETTER

[cityoftreesfilm.com/join](http://cityoftreesfilm.com/join)  
[meridianhillpictures.com/join](http://meridianhillpictures.com/join)

## FACEBOOK

[facebook.com/cityoftreesfilm](https://facebook.com/cityoftreesfilm)  
[facebook.com/meridianhillpictures](https://facebook.com/meridianhillpictures)  
[facebook.com/washingtonparksandpeople](https://facebook.com/washingtonparksandpeople)

## TWITTER + INSTAGRAM

@cityoftreesfilm  
@meridianhillpix  
@washingtonparks

## HASHTAGS

#MHPStories #cityoftreesfilmtour  
#urbanforestry #greenjobs #environmentaljustice  
#returningcitizens #socialjustice  
#documentary #storytelling #docfilmsmatter



# ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS



## MERIDIAN HILL PICTURES

Meridian Hill Pictures' documentary films explore complex social issues through people-centered stories. MHP is a mission-driven documentary production company proudly based in Washington, D.C. Started by brothers Brandon and Lance Kramer in 2010, MHP is a team of passionate and innovative filmmakers and teaching artists committed to sharing untold stories through documentary video. MHP's unique model produces independent documentary films, commissioned short-form docs, and video storytelling trainings for dozens of non-profit, educational and public partners. MHP makes films rooted in building trust with all participants, honest storytelling, strong ethics, and an inherent respect for all perspectives. MHP's work raises awareness of pressing social issues, democratizes the medium, builds people's storytelling capacity, and strategically shares under-represented community perspectives with broad audiences.

Meridian Hill Pictures' independent films have been featured at respected film festivals including Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, San Francisco International Film Festival, Annapolis Film Festival, DC Shorts, and DC Environmental Film Festival, and have been broadcast on PBS. MHP has worked with nonprofit clients including AARP Foundation, National Park Service, John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Ashoka Foundation, and International Baccalaureate. In 2014, MHP received the Mayor's Arts Award, the highest honor given to working artists in the District of Columbia.

[meridianhillpictures.com](http://meridianhillpictures.com)



# ABOUT WASHINGTON PARKS & PEOPLE



## WASHINGTON PARKS & PEOPLE

Since WPP's beginnings in 1990, the organization has helped to transform forgotten and dangerous locations into living green places that serve their communities. Parks & People connects immediately and directly to people where they live. WPP addresses ecological and social issues in a local, human way—by equipping neighbors with knowledge and tools to reclaim their own public spaces. WPP's scope is geographically small — in some cases literally block by block. WPP works across the city to address injustice and empower local residents to transform their public spaces.

WPP provides leadership and support for a city-wide movement for equity, health, and restoration. From Meridian Hill/Malcolm X Park in Northwest DC to Marvin Gaye Park in Far Northeast, Parks & People seeks to reclaim community spaces and restore hope. WPP's efforts address the most basic community needs by making possible safe play, urban agriculture, public health programs, public art and performances, education and sustainable landscape architecture.

Washington Parks & People seeks to ground its work in a reliance on committed community members and leaders — those people who understand and want safe green public spaces that contribute to personal safety, health, economic justice, and learning. Through relationships with community partners in neglected and under-served neighborhoods, WPP mobilizes individuals, private organizations and government bodies to transform dysfunctional land into safe green spaces that invite community use.

[washingtonparks.net](http://washingtonparks.net)



## PREPARING FOR A SCREENING

Thousands of people have participated in screenings at film festivals, watch parties for the PBS/World Channel *America ReFramed* broadcast, via the PBS streaming website + app, on college campuses, and at public agencies and nonprofits. We're thrilled for you to join the growing community of engaged audiences participating in the ongoing discussions sparked by the film.

### TIPS ON ORGANIZING A SCREENING

- Share the film trailer with potential attendees.
- Create an event on your website and Facebook and require RSVPs.
- Promote the event via social media and tag @cityoftreesfilm #MHPStories #cityoftreesfilmtour.
- Contact the media if your screening is public.
- Put up a film poster at your venue and distribute postcards (available upon request).
- Set impact goals and a target audience for your screening.
- Identify panelists and a facilitator to conduct a post-screening discussion.
- Read over the discussion guide and share with panelists and facilitator to prepare for the post-screening discussion.
- Create a run-of-show and keep time throughout the event.
- Remind invites of the upcoming screening one week or more in advance.

### DAY OF SCREENING

- Test the disc before your audience arrives to make sure the picture is clear, and the audio levels are correct.
- Set up a microphone for the facilitator, panelists, and audience if you are in a large enough room.
- Provide light refreshments if possible.
- Encourage audience attendees to introduce themselves.
- Take photos and share via social media and remember to tag us @cityoftreesfilm and hashtag #cityoftreesfilmtour.
- Print copies of the discussion theme page for attendees.
- Use post-screening audience evaluation forms.
- Distribute film postcards (available by request).

### PUBLIC PERFORMANCE RIGHTS

Public performance rights help protect the integrity of the film's copyright. The *City of Trees* DVD includes public performance rights for audiences up to 50 people where no admission is charged. If you plan to hold a public screening for an audience of more than 50 people or where admission will be charged, please contact Meridian Hill Pictures (202.450.4085) or our educational distributor The Cinema Guild (212.685.6242) for more information on rates. The proceeds go toward the substantial costs that went into producing the film and the costs to maintain ongoing outreach efforts. The filmmakers and selected film participants are also available to attend and present at screenings (or join a Q&A by Skype) for an additional fee.

### CONTACT US

The *City of Trees* outreach team is available to provide personalized support to promote your screening via the film website and social media accounts, tips on leading discussions about the film, and individualized guidance in organizing and facilitating your screening.

For specific questions about organizing a screening or to order additional copies, contact **202.450.4085** or email [screenings@meridianhillpictures.com](mailto:screenings@meridianhillpictures.com).

## KARTEMQUIN FILMS

Kartemquin is a collaborative center for documentary media makers who seek to foster a more engaged and empowered society. A revered resource within the film community on issues of fair use, ethics, story and civic discourse, Kartemquin is internationally recognized for crafting quality documentaries backed by audience and community engagement strategies, and for its innovative media arts community programs. Kartemquin is a nonprofit based in Chicago.

[kartemquin.com](http://kartemquin.com)

## MAGIC LABS MEDIA

Magic Labs Media is a media production company owned and operated by CNN political contributor, attorney, environmental justice leader Van Jones.

[magiclabsmedia.com](http://magiclabsmedia.com)

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DC Office of Motion Picture & Television Development

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PBS

