

***The Collector of Bedford Street.* A film by Alice Elliott. Welcome Change Productions, NYC. 2002.**

## INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY GUIDE

This guide to viewing *The Collector of Bedford Street* is designed to help teachers begin a conversation with their students about mental retardation, diversity and inclusion. This dialogue will present an opportunity to explore our biases about people with mental retardation, increase our understanding, and see ways we can support people viewed as “different.” Use the film and guide to enhance a social studies or health unit, promote bias awareness, and inspire community service. Keep these guidelines in mind as you lead the discussion:

- Be direct in talking about disabilities, don’t ignore them. Read the accompanying Fact Sheet about mental retardation so you can answer basic questions that might come up. Use the list of resources provided to research more complex questions.
- Stress that it’s most helpful to acknowledge what a person can do well rather than dwell on what a person cannot do.
- Remind students that a person is more than his/her disability. Don’t limit with labels.

The guide is divided into eight sections: film summary / background information / preparing your students / viewing & responding to the film / deepening students’ understanding of the film / connecting the film to students’ lives / possible activities / definitions & resources. You will need two class periods to define the issues, view the film, and have a meaningful discussion. A double period would be ideal for a brief study. Several periods would allow deeper discussion and group projects.

**SUMMARY** “The Collector of Bedford Street” is a 34 minute documentary about Larry Selman, the filmmaker’s 60-year-old neighbor. A community activist and fundraiser with mental retardation, Larry raises thousands of dollars for charity every year while living in poverty himself. Because of Larry’s 20 years of service to his neighborhood, the community has created a supplemental need adult trust fund for him. This is the first time that a group, rather than an individual’s family, has created such a fund. The film humanizes the abstract statistics of mental retardation and reveals how a community builds tolerance and understanding. “The Collector of Bedford Street” has received numerous awards at film festivals across the US and was nominated for an Academy Award® in 2002.

**BACKGROUND** This documentary, completed in New York City in 2001, portrays a unique friendship between Larry Selman and his neighbors in Greenwich Village. Larry’s neighbors behave in a way that acknowledges his strengths and supports his needs. In a groundbreaking act, they assure his independence into the future by creating an adult supplemental trust fund for him.

Larry Selman is part of a vulnerable population that has been terribly oppressed. There is a long history of misinformation, prejudice and discrimination against people with mental retardation. They have often been kept out of public view, cared for privately at home or hidden away in institutions. Parents of mentally retarded children feared for their children’s care should the parent die or become incapacitated. In 1950, family members and others concerned about the treatment of people with mental retardation founded The Arc to educate the public and advocate for people with mental retardation. Through their efforts and those of other organizations dedicated to helping people with disabilities, perceptions of people with mental retardation have changed. Landmark laws passed in the early 1970’s gave children with disabilities 10% of the spaces in Head Start classes and the right to a free education in “the least restrictive environment.” Today people with “developmental variations” [a new designation used at Bank Street College] are integrated into schools,

communities, and the workplace, and increasingly recognized for what they can do, rather than being identified by what they cannot do. But we still have a long way to go.

**PREPARING YOUR STUDENTS** Before viewing the film with your students, begin your study with a discussion of intelligence and mental retardation:

1. Explore the meaning of intelligence. Ask your students: What is intelligence? What do we mean by intelligence? Aim for a broad definition that goes beyond doing well in school or on tests and includes the ability to adapt to your environment. (Howard Gardner's idea of multiple intelligences believes that people are smart in different ways and intelligence is determined by a society; the kinds of intelligence most valued depend on the kinds of skills and adaptability that society requires.)
2. Explore students' perceptions of mental retardation by creating a web<sup>1</sup> on the board. Quickly elicit their ideas, attitudes, images, and experiences about mental retardation and put them on the web. Then you might ask students to come up with a definition of mental retardation from what they know. Make a note of any questions the students have.

## VIEWING & RESPONDING TO THE FILM

Introduce the film by showing your students the front cover of the video box. Point out the phrase, "Living and giving in the big city." Tell your students that the man on the cover is the filmmaker's neighbor, and the film is a documentary about Larry Selman and his neighbors in Greenwich Village. Watch the film in one sitting, if possible. After viewing, ask your students some general questions:

- What did you find interesting?
- What feelings came up?
- What images or scenes stand out?
- Did you think anything was funny?
- Did anything surprise you? Why?
- What questions do you have? List them on the board. Use the list of resources and Frequently Asked Questions insert to find answers, either as an in-class project or homework assignment.

## DEEPENING STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE FILM

- Ask you students: What are the main themes? Elicit their ideas.
- What is the message of the film? Do you agree with this message?
- What do we learn about mental retardation, community, and ourselves from the film?

*If time permits, discuss any of the following questions. If not, go to "Connecting the Film..."*

- The first scene shows Larry taking an IQ test. He is frustrated with the blocks and confused about the definition of "yesterday," yet he knows that "compassion" means to be kind. He talks about becoming despondent when he was left back in school, later dropping out. How does this scene set up our expectations about Larry and what the film will be about?

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<sup>1</sup> Write "mental retardation" on the board or chart paper and circle it. As students volunteer their associations with mental retardation, write those words, phrases, ideas outside the circle, then draw a line from the words to the circle, thus creating a "web. A web is a quick tool for assessing a group's knowledge and attitudes about a subject.

- At one point Alice asks, “How many people get a daily call from Larry?” Amid much laughter, 15-20 people raise their hands. Answering machine messages are interspersed throughout the film: “Alice, give me a call.” “Alice, I have a letter...” “Alice, can you come over?” “Alice, do we have money for a ring?” What do we learn about Larry from the calls?
- Larry’s persistence in soliciting donations from neighbors, strangers, and even his doctor is remarkable. A friend comments: “Here’s a man who has maybe \$10 spending money who raises more than \$3,000 a year for charity. How can’t we give things back to him?” Do you agree?
- Larry’s friends spring into action after he leaves a disturbing phone message. Long concerned about what will become of Larry if anything happens to Uncle Murray, his neighbors meet to find a way to support him. What do they do? Is this unusual?
- How do we know that Larry is religious? (He prays at his parents’ graves; talks about his beliefs shaped at synagogue; lights a memorial candle for his dog, Happy; celebrates Hanukkah with Ellie.)
- Toward the end of the film we learn through captions that Larry proposed to Ellie and that she’ll give him an answer in a few years. We also learn that Larry’s future is secure because of the Trust Fund created by his friends and neighbors. What do you think will happen now?
- How can we as individuals and as a group appreciate differences and stand up to prejudice the way Larry’s neighbors do? Consider the sources of strength and the traditions that sustain people (e.g., friends and neighbors, a club or block association, religion) or large organizations (United Jewish Appeal) that provide necessary support structures.

## CONNECTING THE FILM TO STUDENTS’ LIVES

- Ask: Have you ever known anyone like Larry? How was s/he treated?
- Ask students to remember a time when they met someone who was “different” in some way but whom they got to know better. Did their attitudes change as they got to know the person? How?
- Ask students to pair up and talk about a time that they saw someone being discriminated against or targeted for being “different.” Ask them to remember a time when they stood up for someone who was “different.” Ask them to talk about a time they saw an adult close to them stand up for someone who was “different.”

*If time permits, discuss any of the following questions or use them for group study.*

- Larry is lucky to have friends and neighbors with enough money to create a trust fund. What about people with similar needs in caring communities without such resources? How will they get the support they need? Should meeting their needs be the responsibility of our society?
- Brainstorm a list of Larry’s characteristics with your students; write them on the board or on chart paper. (The list might include: born in Brooklyn, has a dog, wears glasses, collects money for charity, talks on the phone a lot, celebrates Hanukkah, etc.) Ask for volunteers: What do you have in common with Larry? What do you admire most about Larry?

- Larry worried that his friends wouldn't bother with him if they discovered his low I.Q. Have you ever worried that friends would abandon you if they knew a particular thing about you? What happened when they found out?
- Larry carefully apportions his monthly check to rent and utilities and has little left to spend on himself. Do you set aside part of your allowance or earnings for specific obligations (college, cell phone, etc.)? Is it easy to budget your money?
- Larry gave keys to his apartment to homeless men, allowing them to shower and hang out. The building management nearly evicted him when they discovered what Larry was doing. Do you know anyone who made a bad choice because he/she was lonely? What were the consequences?
- Uncle Murray rearranged his life to care for Larry for the past 30 years. He stopped traveling to prepare Larry's meals, and he gives him spending money. Do you know anyone who radically changed his/her life to make it possible for someone else to have a better life?
- Have you ever been part of an organization or community that took care of a member that needed help? Did things work out? How did you feel?
- Envision an ideal community. Can you picture a community with diverse members who are all taken care of? What must happen for this to be possible?

## POSSIBLE ACTIVITIES

- Compare the AAMR's definition of Mental Retardation with the definition your students developed before viewing the film.
- Assign questions from the "Frequently Asked Questions" insert for individual or group study, either in class or for homework. Students can report their findings to the class and, with the teacher's help, evaluate what they've learned about mental retardation through viewing and discussing *The Collector of Bedford Street*.

## DEFINITIONS

**Mental Retardation:** a disability originating before age 18 that is characterized by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior as expressed in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills. (see **American Association on Mental Retardation**, [http://www.aamr.org/Policies/faq\\_mental\\_retardation.shtml](http://www.aamr.org/Policies/faq_mental_retardation.shtml))

**Developmental Disability:** a mental or physical impairment beginning before the age of 22 that alters or inhibits a person from doing at least three of the following: take care of themselves, speak and be understood clearly, learn, walk, make decisions, earn and manage an income, or live on their own (see **Administration on Developmental Disabilities (ADD)**, <http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/add/about.htm>)

**Supplemental Security Income (SSI):** a Federal income supplement program funded by general tax revenues designed to help aged, blind, and disabled people, who have little or no income meet basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter. (see **Social Security Administration**, <http://www.socialsecurity.gov/notices/supplemental-security-income/>)

**Supplemental Needs Trust Fund:** a trust designed for a disabled person to retain government assistance while receiving funds to improve quality of life. Funds are distributed through a third party.

## RESOURCES

### [www.welcomechange.org](http://www.welcomechange.org)

Welcome Change is the production company for The Collector of Bedford Street. The website tells about the making of the documentary, about Larry and his neighbors, about how they created the trust fund, about organizations working for change and tolerance. The site also has links to other organizations.

### [www.thearc.org](http://www.thearc.org)

The Arc is the national organization of and for people with mental retardation and related developmental disabilities and their families. It is devoted to promoting and improving supports and services for people with mental retardation and their families. The

association also fosters research and education on preventing mental retardation in infants and young children.

### [www.aamr.org](http://www.aamr.org)

**American Association on Mental Retardation (AAMR)** is the oldest and largest interdisciplinary organization of professionals (and others) concerned about mental retardation and related disabilities. AAMR promotes progressive policies, sound research, effective practices, and universal human rights for people with intellectual disabilities.

### [www.ahrcnyc.org](http://www.ahrcnyc.org)

**Association for the Help of Retarded Children (AHRC)** is a New York City-based organization whose goal is to offer disabled individuals day-to-day living that is as rich, absorbing and worthwhile as possible, with an emphasis on helping clients live up to their maximum potential in the community. The Association is one of the largest consumer-based nonprofit organizations in the City. It is governed by a Board of Directors, two-thirds of whom must be relatives of persons with developmental disabilities, working together with a staff of dedicated professionals.

### [www.ujafedny.org](http://www.ujafedny.org)

UJA-Federation was founded by a group of New York Jews that came together to help impoverished European immigrants in the early 20th century, and has continued to care for those in need. UJA-Federation continuously evaluates and adjusts how it goes about its life-saving work. Today, their mission embraces three core ideas: **caring**, **renewing**, and **connecting**.