

FREE FOR ALL: THE PUBLIC LIBRARY

ENGAGEMENT GUIDE



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Letter from the Filmmakers

Did you love your childhood library? I did. So did my co-director, Lucie Faulknor. We're both lifelong library users. My connection with libraries began in the Deep South, and Lucie's was on the West Coast. She escaped to her library daily, finding refuge from the pandemonium of a crowded house with seven kids. I walked to mine after school, devouring books and staying safe until my parents came home from work. Our stories are not unique. Millions of fellow citizens have personal library stories—some far more dramatic than ours.

As children, we took our local libraries for granted. They were as constant as the sun rising, as freely accessible as the air we breathed. Libraries felt like birthrights, alongside public schools, parks, and roads—part of the infrastructure of a thriving democracy. It wasn't until we grew older, until life began to challenge those certainties, that we saw libraries in a different light.

About twenty years ago, Lucie and I were in New Orleans finishing another film when Hurricane Katrina struck. Our family evacuated to Baton Rouge, where the local library became our lifeline. Day after day, we lined up around the block—not for books, but for help and trusted information. It was a place to use a computer, file insurance claims, search for missing loved ones, and, perhaps most importantly, find a sense of respite amid chaos. We discovered that librarians are first responders. Our vision of what a library could be shifted forever, and the seed for this film was planted.

Since then, we've witnessed libraries come to the rescue in moments of national and personal crisis. Through floods, wildfires, recessions, a global pandemic, inflation, and civil unrest, libraries have stood as beacons of hope and resilience. But as we traveled the country, we

also saw troubling signs—budget shortfalls, library closures, even privatization. We realized just how much we had taken libraries for granted, and we wondered: how many others had done the same?

For many, libraries are places to find books or a quiet corner, but for millions of other Americans, they are lifelines. They offer internet access to those without it, job search assistance, childcare programs, language classes, and safe spaces for community and creativity. Libraries are one of the last truly public commons, spaces we all own, yet they are constantly at risk.

Our hope is that this film inspires viewers to see libraries anew—as dynamic, vital institutions at the heart of democracy. Libraries are more than places where stories are stored; they are where communities are built, where futures are imagined, and where dignity is upheld.

If this film leaves you with one action, let it be this: go to your local library and thank a librarian. For being there. For believing in the transformative power of knowledge. And for keeping the doors open for all of us.

—Dawn Logsdon and Lucie Faulknor

About the Film

FILM SYNOPSIS AND OVERVIEW

The public library is one of America’s most valued, yet endangered institutions. The public library system was founded on a visionary principle—to create a place where anyone can enter and encounter a universe of ideas, free of charge. *Free for All: The Public Library* chronicles the evolution of the nation’s public libraries, tracing the battles over who can enter, what belongs there, and who makes these decisions while exploring how public spaces are defined and defended.

Director Dawn Logsdon travels the United States, discovering unsung historic and modern-day figures, often women, who contributed to the library’s integral position within democracy. Ernestine Rose was an early pioneer who provided books in languages such as Yiddish and Chinese to her immigrant Manhattan neighborhood.¹ She also hired the New York Public Library’s (NYPL) first African American librarians. One was Regina Andrews, who in 1938, became the first Black librarian to officially lead an NYPL branch, the 115th Street Library. As a librarian of the 135th Street branch (now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture), Andrews helped transform this branch into an intellectual and artistic hub of the Harlem Renaissance. And the impact of these female librarians continues into our contemporary era. In a rural Wisconsin town, librarian Elizabeth Timmins now knows all her patrons’ names and literary preferences. Tameka Roby is a library outreach worker in Louisiana who drives the East Baton Rouge bookmobile, providing books and various other services to kids, families, and seniors.

Free for All: The Public Library charts the institution’s trajectory, from America’s original Free Library Movement that began in the mid-19th century to current struggles in a digital age amidst budget cuts, closures, and polarizing book bans.² Following the stories of public library visitors and staff striving to implement innovative policies, the film celebrates a civic institution whose offerings are free and whose doors are open to all.

¹ [FSU Digital Repository](#) retrieved October 24, 2024

² [Encyclopedia](#) retrieved October 24, 2024

SCREENING OBJECTIVES

Indie Lens Pop-Up screenings of *Free for All: The Public Library* will pursue the following objectives:

- Celebrate the knowledge and contributions of the librarians and staff who work at our public libraries
- Showcase libraries' value to their communities by engaging attendees with local library programming
- Illuminate untold histories of the women who shaped public libraries and the library movement
- Emphasize how public goods (such as public libraries, public parks, and public media) contribute to our democracy
- Prompt thoughtful conversations about issues like privacy, equity, and intellectual freedom

TOPICS AND THEMES

Free for All: The Public Library explores several central themes, all of which can prompt further discussion about the influence of public libraries and other public institutions in our society. The topics and themes described below are potential ways to frame your events and post-film conversations.

American Democracy, Civic Ideals, and the Public Square

“The public” is central to the American experiment. Our democracy rests upon an enduring ideal of *demos*—“we the people.” And our democracy also rests upon the free availability of information necessary for upholding our civic institutions and fostering healthy public debate.

Free for All: The Public Library highlights the central role that public libraries have played in making educational resources and information more widely available and accessible for the American people. Libraries—among other public media and public education institutions—are the cornerstone of our deepest civic principles because they support the generally educated citizenry in ways that enable a democracy to function and persist.

Literacy and Citizenship

Books contain powerful ideas that can open up the world for each of us. These ideas can transport us into unexpected stories, places, and perspectives far beyond our individual experiences.

Literacy is also a powerful component of democratic citizenship. The ability to read goes hand-in-hand with knowing how to gather information, learning how to think critically, and then being able to express views through the voting process. As *Free for All: The Public Library* highlights, the ability to read has also been contested ground in our national and local politics. In the 19th century, literacy became one of the much-surveilled lines between



citizen and slave.³ Since then, literacy has been a core part of voting laws and opportunities for public participation. Today, it continues to be a fundamental skill for claiming a place within our society.

Women’s Contributions to the Public Library Movement

America’s Free Library Movement was largely staffed and propelled by women, especially in the small town and rural libraries that made books more widely available across the country. Many of America’s first female librarians seized new professional opportunities through the development and expansion of the public library system, even into the nation’s most far-flung and under-served areas.

Not only did women find new opportunities in the public library system, but also they were a driving force in making the development and expansion happen, playing a central role in getting the majority of small town libraries built. Then they volunteered to help keep them running as well as funded, often under the auspices of the local women’s club.^{4, 5}

In celebrating libraries and the contributions of librarians to our democracy, this film brings to light little-known stories of the women who made this movement possible.

³ [History](#) retrieved October 24, 2024

⁴ [American Libraries](#) retrieved October 24, 2024

⁵ [History of Books](#) retried October 25, 2024

Segregation, Immigration, and Racial Justice

Racist segregation policies, combined with negative attitudes toward immigrants and cultural assimilation, have directly shaped our public libraries, as they have shaped many other public spaces in America. While the earliest public libraries excluded African Americans by law, they also played a central role in integrating new immigrants into American society and helping them learn English—with all the linguistic and social tensions that assimilation contains.

Free for All: The Public Library reveals the history of segregation, immigration, and racial justice. In many respects, the story of public libraries mirrors the story of America: its aspirations for freedom and equality, alongside the ongoing effort to realize those ideals more fully.

Libraries and Contemporary Public Services

In the 21st century, public libraries aren't just about books. They frequently provide other services, including opportunities for immigrants ranging from technology resources to language classes. They serve as gathering spaces for people to find community, especially those who have few resources or may need more sources of public support. During an era of the vanishing public square, as well as increasing social isolation and political fragmentation, our local public libraries provide essential places for us to mingle with our fellow citizens.

As this film highlights, the job of a librarian is changing in our contemporary era. Yes, librarians serve patrons and manage collections and other library resources. But they also can be called upon to step in as impromptu social workers in many communities, helping bridge gaps in public services as they serve as first responders to people in crisis. In addition, when we consider the current role of the public library in America, we can discuss how to sustain other public resources, including public news and television media, that help uphold our social fabric. And we can also consider how to help ensure that people know how to maintain their information literacy in a world of “fake news.”



Engaging with the Film

As you plan your event, consider approaching a public library branch in your area and partnering with library staff to host a screening. (Many existing Indie Lens Pop-Up partners are public libraries!)

Before the event, take time to survey the library space to figure out event setup and logistics (including for the screening itself, for post-screening activities, and for other elements such as accessibility for audience members with disabilities). For more specific accessibility-planning resources, check out the [Indie Lens Pop-Up Event Accessibility Guide](#).

POTENTIAL AUDIENCES

Who is the audience for these events? Everybody! “Free for all” really does mean free for *all*. Libraries are committed to accessibility and inclusivity, and we hope your event will be too.

Yet also remember that the “public” of the “public library” is incredibly diverse: from cultural, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds; religious and political views; forms of education to vocations; experiences of disability; and more. Facilitators should keep this diversity in mind while planning their event.

Consider placing publicity materials for your event at various community centers, public and cultural spaces, universities, schools, bookstores, and nonprofits in your area. Also remember that parents may come to the screening with children—this engagement guide includes several activity ideas that may be more suitable for younger people. You also might want to make childcare options available onsite during the screening.

SUGGESTED PARTNERSHIPS

Here are some ideas for partners for your event. These organizations, groups, and individuals can be activity moderators, attendees, resources for additional information, and overall supporters and cheerleaders.

- State libraries and library associations
- Local Friends of the Public Library groups and local Centers for the Book
- Organizations that work to promote public education and arts/culture
- Local advocates for early literacy, housing and homelessness, immigration, English language learning, civic engagement, social services, and so forth
- Local book clubs (for various age groups), local historical societies, and aspiring young writer clubs
- Local homeschooling groups
- Local government officials, including local legislators and the mayor's office
- Local writers and other local celebrities
- Local radio stations, news outlets, and other forms of public media

FRAMING THE CONVERSATION

After you show the film, you can choose which format to use for the remainder of your event. Possible options include hosting a moderated discussion, engaging participants in group activities, and other ideas of your choosing. This guide includes some potential discussion questions and activity-based engagement ideas (see below).

Also consider ways to get local librarians and local authors involved in post-screening discussion and/or activities. They might serve as moderators, featured speakers, or activity leaders. If a local library has different offerings or features that they'd like to spotlight during your screening event, feel free to follow their lead. Help empower your local librarians—they are real live experts!

Finally, please keep these caveats in mind for your activities/discussion:

- Several questions and activities in this guide lend themselves to personal reflection. If you choose these questions/activities, encourage all meaningful insights they bring up! But also know that deeply personal conversations sometimes take more time than planned. You might want to build in some guardrails or scheduling constraints if you would like to include other topics/activities in your event.
- In today's political climate, public libraries (among other public institutions) can play a highly charged role in ongoing debates about the nature of truth, free speech, and so forth. Recently, conversations about book banning can ignite audiences and cause division. Consider utilizing a phrase like "freedom to read," and check out the [American Library Association's guiding statement](#).



Use your best judgment as you plan your event: Provide a respectful space for political conversations to happen while also guiding the audience to connect over a wider range of issues.

- Above all, we hope that this film will spark important conversations about the role of the library within your community and larger society.

DISCUSSING THE FILM

- What memories do you have of using your public library? Are there specific librarians, books, events, or services that have impacted you?
- Can you share a story about how reading a book (or checking out a movie or a piece of music from your local library) changed your mind about something? What did you learn or how did your initial thoughts change?
- Which resources, programming, or activities have you most appreciated seeing at your local public library? Are there certain events you would be excited to attend or learn more about in the future?
- What new perspectives on American history and culture do you have now that you've watched this film about the origins and impact of the public library? Are there specific events, people, or ideas from the film that resonated with you? Why?
- What does "the public good" mean to you? What are some of the different ways that libraries contribute to the public good? Have you witnessed such contributions, either in the film or in your own life? What were they?
- What is the role of information in a democratic society? How do you access and find information in your own life?
- Working as a librarian involves many skills. After watching this film, how would you describe these different skills? What qualities does a public librarian need to bring to their work?



- Have you ever felt unwelcome at a library or in a public space? What happened? How could that experience have been avoided? Similarly, have you ever had a highly positive experience at the library? What made this experience so memorable?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

By hosting your screening event at a public library, you will be participating in making a “public,” or a group of people who gather and get to know each other. Keep this in mind as you select your activities. Feel free to mix and match as you see fit and/or create separate activity stations in your event space.

Small group activity on personal stories of reading (10-15 minutes):

- Have event attendees break into small groups and share with each other their answers to these questions: Do you have specific memories of visiting your local public library for the first time? Have there been specific books, people, events, or fun new discoveries that encouraged your reading life? Give time for shared reflection.
- **Alternative, more child-friendly format:** Provide paper and markers and invite attendees to draw a picture of their reading life or their life at the public library, whatever that looks like for them. These drawings can be hung around the public library after the event.

Spotlighting local librarians and their stories (15-20 minutes):

- Host a short discussion panel after the film screening, in which two or three librarians share their stories (including personal stories of reading, how they became librarians, what they enjoy about being librarians and what they find challenging, what they hope the public will get out of the library, etc.). This can be a moderated conversation, and it can also include questions from the audience. Encourage audience follow-up and open dialogue!
- **Alternative format:** You might include local authors of note in this discussion panel, to discuss the inspiration and process they bring to their writing.

Library scavenger hunt (15 minutes):

- In collaboration with local library staff, create a scavenger hunt that involves searching for notable features of the public library building and its collections, including services the library offers beyond books. Split event attendees into small groups and have them roam around the library to cross off items from the list. These lists could contain many things—a specific reading room or reading nook, a library bookshelf section, technical equipment, a piece of art on the wall, existing flyers for library programming, some bit of quirky local lore!
- **Optional follow-up activity:** Have event attendees come back and reflect on which new things they learned about their public library from this scavenger hunt or how it helped them appreciate their memories of the library. This can be done in small groups or all together.

Favorite book show-and-tell/speed meetings (15-20 minutes):

- Child-friendly format: Invite event attendees into the children’s or young adult section of the library. Collections can either be left on the shelves or be pulled out onto a rug or table, whichever library staff and event facilitators decide is most effective. Ask attendees these questions: From the books available here, which one stands out as a favorite, either now or from your childhood? What made this favorite book so meaningful? Then suggest that attendees find their favorite book and establish small groups for them to share their books. You can also tweak this activity to be more suitable for adults or different age groups.
- **Alternative format:** Have a “book speed” meeting. Participants find their favorite book from the library, sit across from someone else at a table, and have a 5-minute conversation about why they chose that book. Then, in true “speed-dating” fashion, have one person get up and move down to the next table to begin a new conversation. This is also a good way to meet a neighbor.
- **Optional follow-up activity:** Have a whiteboard, large blank poster board, or stack of sticky notes available in the room. Event attendees (or an event facilitator) can write the title of their favorite book on the board. Then reflect together: Is there one wildly popular “favorite book” for the night? Or are there many different favorites?

Library activities spotlight (10-15 minutes):

- An idea for libraries that host many community activities/events and want to get people involved: Set up stations around the library where the hosts of various public library programs are on hand to chat with attendees about available offerings. Invite event attendees to roam around and learn about library programs and maybe even participate in a fun mini activity of their own! (Examples: short session of baby story time; children’s mini-arts activities; short, guided yoga stretching for libraries that do this kind of thing; learning about the newest book for the local library book club; learning how to print stuff on the library computer; etc.)

Sticky-note reflections (5-10 minutes):

- Either while entering or leaving the event, invite attendees to write short answers to one or more of the following questions on a sticky note or a postcard (to send to someone afterwards): Why do you love your public library? What does your public library mean to you? What would you change at your public library? Stick the notes on a wall or in a central location in the library building. After the event, attendees can go and read other people’s responses, and/or the notes can stay up to invite further engagement with the public library and what it means to different people.
- **Alternative digital format:** event attendees can send messages via the chat at a virtual event, or this could be a prompt to include in social media posts about your library screening event.

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

In person / through local organizations:

- Provide a booth for attendees to sign up for library cards at the event, to have further conversations with library staff, to browse unique books, and to learn about “librarian favorite picks.” You can also have a booth for your local Friends of the Library chapter if there is one.
- Is there a “library of things” at this local public library? Bring it out for people to look at and engage with!
- Provide sign-up sheets for attendees to volunteer at their local public library and handouts about library events/resources/program offerings (any of this can be combined with the more in-depth “library activities spotlight” above).

On social media / through digital channels:

- Ask people to share videos and stories about their local public library. Tag @freeforall and @IndependentLens on Facebook and Instagram and include the hashtag #IndieLens.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Here are some resources with further information to help you as you plan your event. You might also use some of these links for finding potential partners and speakers.

General Resources:

- [Free for All: The Public Library PBS Independent Lens website](#)
- [Free for All: The Public Library filmmaker website](#)
- [PBS Books](#)

National Library Organizations:

- [American Library Association](#)
- [Public Library Association](#)
- [Library of Congress](#)
- [Urban Libraries Council](#)
- [Association for Rural and Small Libraries](#)
- [Association for Library Service to Children](#)
- [Young Adult Library Service Association](#)
- [Chief Officers of State Library Agencies](#) (for looking up your state library)

Other Organizations that Support Libraries:

- [ILoveLibraries](#)
- [EveryLibrary Institute](#)
- Friends of the Library: Look up your local Friends groups online. There are many! Also check out [United for Libraries](#), which engages with many of these local groups.
- Search for other local nonprofits in your state or city that support libraries and library personnel. (There are also many!)

Other National Organizations Doing Public Education or Literacy Work:

- [National Coalition for Literacy](#)
- [National Association for the Education of Young Children](#)
- [National Head Start Association](#)
- [National Writing Project](#)
- [Reach Out and Read](#)
- [Little Free Library](#)
- Also search for other local nonprofits or branches in your area doing this kind of work!

Further Online Reading on the History and Impact of Public Libraries:

- Digital Public Library of America's online exhibition "[A History of U.S. Public Libraries](#)"
- Los Angeles Public Library's "[The Library in America](#)"
- Check out the Library of Congress's blog post "[America's Public Libraries](#)" (as well as other library-related content available through this site!).
- The Boston Public Library plays a unique role in this film and in the American Free Library Movement. Check out a [brief account of its history](#).
- Check out "[The Library History Buff](#)," an old-school site by Larry Nix.

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INDIE LENS POP-UP

Indie Lens Pop-Up is a neighborhood series that brings people together for film screenings and community-driven conversations. Featuring documentaries seen on PBS's *Independent Lens*, Indie Lens Pop-Up draws local residents, leaders, and organizations to discuss what matters most, from newsworthy topics and social issues to family and community relationships. Since its inception in 2005, more than 7,200 Indie Lens Pop-Up events have brought an estimated 430,000 participants together to discuss issues that impact local communities. For more information, visit the [Indie Lens Pop-Up website](#).

INDEPENDENT LENS

Independent Lens is an Emmy® Award-winning PBS documentary series. With founding executive producer Lois Vossen, the series has been honored with 10 Academy Award nominations and features documentaries united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement, and unflinching visions of independent filmmakers. Presented by ITVS, Independent Lens is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Acton Family Giving, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Ford Foundation, Park Foundation, Wyncote Foundation, and National Endowment for the Arts. Stream anytime on the PBS app. For more information, visit the [Independent Lens website](#).

Join the conversation with #IndieLens on Facebook and Instagram at @IndependentLens.

ITVS

Independent Television Services (ITVS) is the largest co-producer of independent documentaries in the United States. For more than 30 years the San Francisco non-profit has funded and partnered with documentary filmmakers to produce and distribute untold stories. ITVS incubates and co-produces these award-winning titles and premieres them on our Emmy® Award-winning PBS series, *Independent Lens*. ITVS titles appear on PBS, WORLD, NETA, and can be streamed on various digital platforms including the PBS app. ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Acton Family Giving, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Ford Foundation, Wyncote Foundation. For more information, visit the [ITVS website](#).

CORPORATION FOR PUBLIC BROADCASTING

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), a private, nonprofit corporation created by Congress in 1967, is the steward of the federal government's investment in public broadcasting. It helps support the operations of more than 1,500 locally owned and operated public television and radio stations nationwide. CPB is also the largest single source of funding for research, technology, and program development for public radio, public television, and related online services. For more information, visit the [CPB website](#).

PHOTO CREDITS

New York Public Library and Tulare Public Library images by Robert Dawson. All other images by the filmmaker Lucie Faulknor.

