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An Educational Tool

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Licensed to Kill: An Educational Tool

Introduction

Licensed to Kill probes the lives of men whose contempt for homosexuals led them to murder. The film examines the social, political, and cultural environments of these men and asks whether society had given them a "license to kill" homosexuals.

Licensed to Kill focuses specifically on stories about men and may seem relevant only to the male experience. However, the film's very specificity makes it especially effective as a starting point from which to launch more general discussions. A main goal of the film is to raise questions about societal gender roles and cultural heterosexism. The stories recounted in *Licensed to Kill* offer examples of how gender and sexuality norms are enforced with violence or the threat of violence. Moreover, the film challenges viewers to consider how societal prejudices manifest themselves in the actions of individuals.

The filmmaker acknowledges that resources focused on anti-lesbian/bisexual/transgendered violence are needed but hopes that *Licensed to Kill* will stimulate discussions on these topics as well.

Audience Preparation

Licensed to Kill is an uncompromising film. The filmmaker was himself a gay bashing victim and set out to produce a brutally honest examination of violence. For some audience members, the graphic photos, the use of profanity, and the hard-hitting stories of the killers may be disturbing. Moderators are advised to introduce the film accordingly, depending on viewers' needs; conversely, the filmmaker believes that watching the film without an advisory may result in a powerful exposure to the situations depicted. In any case, moderators should be prepared for a range of reactions to the film: silence, outrage, grief, surprise, and in some cases, sympathy, compassion, or empathy for the murderers.

How to Use *Licensed to Kill* and This Guide

Note: DVD references pertain only to the DVD version of *Licensed to Kill*. If you are using a VHS version and would like to upgrade it to the DVD format, please contact DeepFocus Productions, Inc. for information about the VHS/DVD exchange program.

Films can be an effective tool to help present information, encourage people to take interest in an issue, provide a starting point for people to exchange views, and to create an opportunity for personal reflection. This guide is designed to facilitate these and other purposes in a variety of settings, such as classrooms, libraries, community dialogues, religious institutions, diversity training, conferences, and youth groups.

Moderators are encouraged to first take a look at the table of contents for both this manual and the DVD (if you are using the DVD version of *Licensed to Kill*). Moderators should then view the film and the DVD supplements along with this guide to choose areas that best suit viewers' needs. Keep in mind that this booklet was written to serve diverse audiences and not all subject areas may apply to your specific situation.

While watching *Licensed to Kill*, you may want to pause occasionally to take notes or to refer back to this guide if necessary. DVD users will find it convenient to skip from one chapter to another in order to identify certain sections that may be particularly meaningful or to bypass sections that may not be applicable.

While there is no substitute for the emotional impact of watching a film uninterrupted, don't feel that you must show the entire film to your group. Schedule permitting, you may find it more practical to break up the film and show it in two or more sessions. The DVD format allows you to quickly access different sections as you see fit, and you can always replay or introduce new sequences during your group's discussion to help illustrate a particular point. You might want to show just segments, or present selections from the DVD supplements, or both. Most importantly, free feel to customize a program that best serves your audience.

This study guide is divided into the following main sections:

- **THEMES:** Ten subsections, organized by theme, draw attention to particular examples from the film and suggest possible discussion topics and related research projects.
- **PROFILES:** Each of the seven men featured in *Licensed to Kill* are profiled here. Suggestions for discussing each case are offered, along with references to selected "Themes" when applicable. Also, profiles of three additional men that are only in the additional features section of the DVD version are included.
- **BIBLIOGRAPHY:** Reference books, journals, and other publications are grouped topically in twelve subsections.
- **ORGANIZATIONS:** A compilation of national and local agencies that center on and illuminate the issues put forward in *Licensed to Kill*.
- **ANTI-VIOLENCE PROGRAMS:** A list of agencies nationwide that focuses specifically on issues of violence that affect the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) community.
- **GLOSSARY:** A list of terms related to the LGBT community, including potentially problematic terms and phrases.
- **ESSAY:** An essay on anti-gay violence by award-winning journalist, Chris Bull.

1

Education about homosexuality occurs in many different ways. *Licensed to Kill* seeks to explore the contexts in which knowledge about homosexuality is disseminated and how this process affects personal attitudes regarding the topic. Corey Burley suggests: “I don’t think a person just grows up bad...You eventually gets that way from being around somebody that is like that.” (DVD chapter 7)

Jeffrey Swinford remembers learning about homosexuality in junior high school. An eighth grade science class assignment required him to report on a subject of which he disapproved. The school librarian recommended he look up homosexuality in the encyclopedia. Swinford also recalls reading about homosexuality in the Bible. (DVD chapter 3)

Suggested Activities:

- Discuss how the issue of homosexuality has been treated — or ignored — at your present and/or past school(s). How did a teacher respond to incidents such as name-calling and anti-gay comments in the classroom? Discuss how these examples contribute to the understanding of homosexuality.
- Research political campaigns in specific local school board elections where the issue of homosexuality played a role. Discuss whether or not the educational system has a role in teaching about homosexuality. Include an examination of the relationship between religion and public school policies.
- Recall your first introductions to homosexuality and how these first lessons influenced your feelings about the topic. Probe the accuracy of these first lessons.

2

Religion can play a significant role in the formation of attitudes toward homosexuality. Jay Johnson cites his particular religious upbringing as a main influence on his feelings about his own homosexual orientation. (DVD chapter 8)

Suggested Activities:

- Research religious references to homosexuality and compare how different organized religions treat the subject. For related research on this topic see Arthur Dong’s film, *Family Fundamentals* (www.deepfocusproductions.com); or see excerpts in “Other Titles: *Family Fundamentals*” in the DVD Additional Features section.
- Reflect upon your own experience with religion and discuss how homosexuality is treated. If applicable, compare your own beliefs about homosexuality with the stated doctrines of your religion. How does your religion deal with members whose beliefs contravene doctrine?
- Examine how religion has historically been used as a justification for violence, whether over homosexuality or other issues such as abortion. Include an analysis of why some religions especially focus on the condemnation of homosexuality while downplaying other aspects of society that are similarly banned.
- Distinguish religious beliefs from religious politics.
- Explore different ways in which people disagree with moral and religious beliefs other than their own, e.g., divorce, polygamy, adultery, and dietary restrictions. Does the same level of demonization and violence exist in acknowledging these differences as does with the disagreement over homosexuality? Analyze the comparisons.

8

Hate crimes legislation became a topic of national debate as a result of the 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard in Wyoming.

Suggested Activities:

- Find out whether or not your state has a “hate crime sentence enhancement law” — a law that provides the possibility of increasing a perpetrator’s sentence when the crime is proved to have been motivated by bias based on particular traits. What are the specific traits that are included in your state’s law, if it exists?
- Research and discuss the pros and cons of adding “sexual orientation” to existing hate crime laws. Consider the following examples from the film:
 - William Kiley’s video-documented attack led to Santa Clara County’s first hate crime conviction. Discuss the ramifications of this sentence enhancement and what it may mean for local citizens, the victim, and the perpetrator himself. (DVD chapter 6)
 - Donald Aldrich laments: “They’ve got my name all up in the legislature trying to push new hate crime statutes and bills and everything else. So maybe something good came out of it [the murder of Nicholas West] after all. They say, ‘You can find a little bit of good in everything.’ “ (DVD chapter 14)
 - Review the convictions of the murderers and compare their different sentences. None of the convictions was enhanced by hate-crimes statutes. What differences, if any, would they have made? (DVD chapter 23)

9

Police are referred to often in *Licensed to Kill*.

Sergeant Lawrence Newcomb organized a sting operation for the Houston Police Department. The operation required officers to pose as civilians — out-of-uniform — in the gay neighborhood known as Montrose and to allow themselves to be targets of gay bashers (DVD chapter 1). Similar operations have been conducted by the Long Beach Police Department in California and the New York City Police Department in Manhattan, New York.

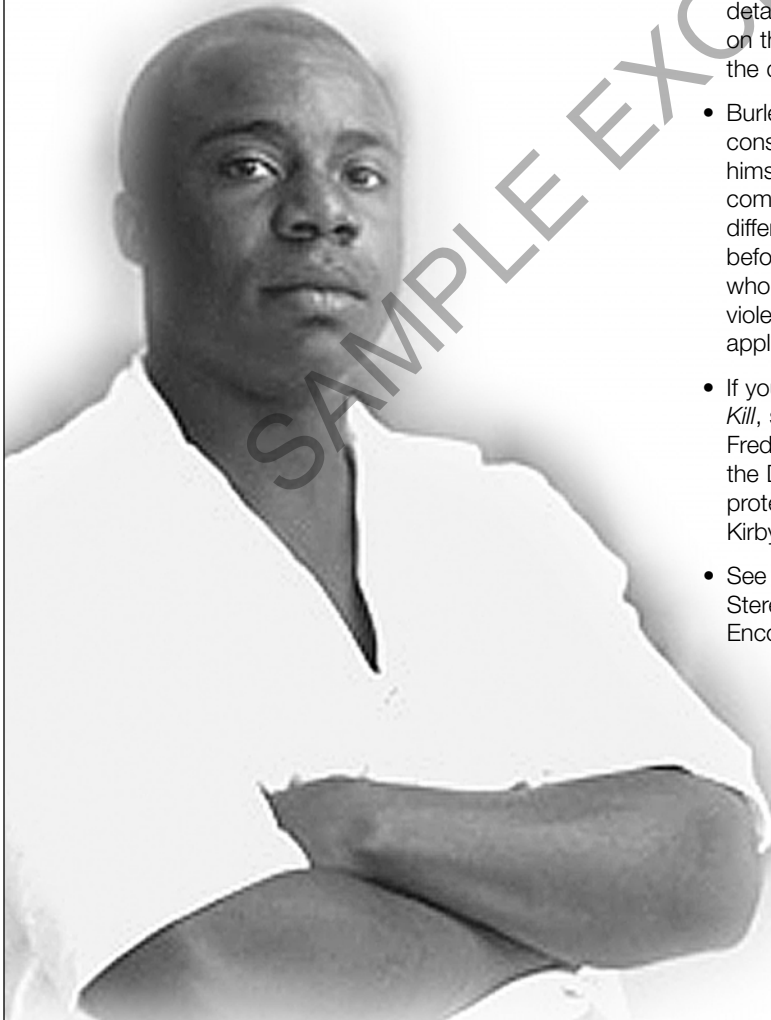
These programs counter Donald Aldrich’s and Jeffrey Swinford’s assertions that local police ignored violent crimes against homosexuals. According to Swinford: “Not too many people in the world care about a homosexual. And the police are the same way. The police ain’t gonna do nothin’ in Little Rock to help them.” (DVD chapter 12)

Suggested Activities:

- Research your local police department’s attitudes regarding the gay community and its policies for responding to incidents of anti-gay violence. Discuss how law enforcement attitudes may affect your city’s perception of homosexuality. In what way, if any, do police perceptions of homosexuals affect anti-gay violence, the treatment of such victims, or have an impact on the quality of the criminal investigation of these cases?
- Invite a representative from your local police department to discuss its relationships with the local gay community.
- If there is a local gay community center and/or anti-gay violence program, invite a representative to discuss their work and their relationships with law enforcement. Conduct an on-site visit and research their efforts to combat anti-gay violence.



Corey Burley grew up in the projects of Dallas. He recalls being harassed as a youth by bullies and realized that the only way to protect himself was to become a bully himself. On October 26, 1991, Burley and two friends set out to rob Thanh Nguyen and his companion as they ate hamburgers at a park bench. Burley claims he shot Nguyen after being prodded to do so by his friends. Nguyen was an immigrant from Viet Nam who came to America to escape the war. In 2003, Burley was transferred to the Hodge Facility in Rusk, Texas. He is eligible for parole in 2026.



COREY BURLEY

- **Born:** January 2, 1970
- **Crime:** on October 26, 1991, murdered Thanh Nguyen, 29.
- **Location of crime:** Reverchon Park - Dallas, Texas
- **Conviction:** Capital murder
- **Sentence:** Life

Suggested Activities:

- Discuss Burley's need to create a tough male image. Recall a personal experience within a group setting where you had to prove something about yourself. How does the dynamics of peer pressure affect personal behavior? At what point might you be pushed to "cross the line?" (DVD chapters 7, 12, and 21)
- Burley was unaware of this victim's identity. On pulling the gun's trigger, Burley states: "You do it because you want to see what's gonna happen...The bullet that I fired killed him. It wasn't my will to kill him, but the bullet that I fired killed him." Examine Burley's detachment from his crime. Incorporate a discussion on the media's representation of violence as well as the dehumanization of gay people. (DVD chapter 12)
- Burley didn't seem to have anticipated the consequences of his actions, for his victim, or for himself. This is a common pattern with people who commit crimes. How might his behavior have been different if he had thought about the consequences beforehand? For moderators working with viewers who might be potential perpetrators of anti-gay violence, query how Burley's example might be applicable to their own lives. (DVD chapter 12)
- If you are working with the DVD version of *Licensed to Kill*, see an interview with Burley's accomplice, Frederick Kirby, in the additional interviews section of the DVD. Note that both men share similar ideas of protecting themselves by creating a tough persona. Kirby's profile is included at the end of this section.
- See this booklet's sections on: Education, Stereotypes, Gay Cruising Areas, and Sexual Encounters.


JEFFREY SWINFORD

- **Born:** April 18, 1971
- **Crime:** On July 30, 1993, murdered Chris Miller, 23.
- **Location of crime:** Little Rock, Arkansas
- **Convictions:** Second degree murder and robbery
- **Sentence:** 20 years

Swinford first learned about homosexuality in junior high school. He believed that the local police was not concerned with violent crimes against homosexuals, and as a consequence, sought them out as easy prey to rob. On July 30, 1993, Swinford and two friends met their victim, Chris Miller, at a park where gay men hung out. They agreed to go to Miller's house for drinks and drugs. Swinford claims that Miller made a sexual advance towards his friend that led to a fight and eventually Miller's death. On August 31, 2000, Swinford was released to the Searcy parole office in Prairie County, AK. In September 2002, Swinford was rearrested for aggravated assault, receiving stolen property, and fleeing from police. He is eligible for parole again in 2009.

Suggested Activities:

- For males: If someone of the same sex flirted with you, describe your response and discuss the reasons. How would your response differ if the flirting was verbal as opposed to physical? If applicable, how have women responded to your own flirting or to sexually aggressive words or actions?
- Swinford attacked Miller after he touched his friend's knee. Swinford confesses: "He was trying to make a homosexual advance at my best friend. He's dead because of it...I don't have any opinion whatsoever for homosexuals except they oughta all be taken care of." Probe Swinford's justification for murder. (DVD chapter 20)
- Analyze the similarities and differences between flirting amongst heterosexual men and women with the flirtation that may occur between a gay man and a heterosexual man. Give particular attention to a discussion of unwanted flirtations and rape.
- See this booklet's sections on: Education, Anti-Gay Behavior, Gay Cruising Areas, and Sexual Encounters



"He was trying to make a homosexual advance at my best friend..."

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Appendix 2: ESSAY – *Blood Upon Them*

By Chris Bull
October 2003

On a chilly October 1998 evening in Laramie, Wyoming, Matthew Shepard, a student at a local university, headed out for a drink at a bar where he was a regular. There he came across Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney. By insinuating that they were gay, the two young men lured Shepard into their truck. After driving him to a deserted stretch on the outskirts of town, they lashed him to a wooden fence, whipped him with the butt of a .357 Magnum, and left him to die in the frigid prairie night. Unconscious and near death, Shepard was discovered by a bicyclist. He was flown to a hospital but never regained consciousness. He was 21.

In the weeks that followed, journalists descended on Laramie, unleashing an unprecedented flood of press coverage, notable as much for its quantity as quality. It quickly became the most chronicled gay bashing in history. Only three other cases came close — the assassination of San Francisco's Harvey Milk in 1978, the killing of sailor Allen Schindler in 1992, and soldier Barry Winchell in 1998, the year after Shepard's murder.

But the voluminous coverage raised some vexing questions. Since gay bashing had existed since the founding of the republic — when homosexuality was punishable by death — why had it taken the press so long to discover it as the national disgrace it is? By the passage of the 1964 civil rights act, lynching of African-Americans had all but disappeared, replaced by other,

more subtle forms of racism. With the emergence of a vocal and visible gay rights movement, it wasn't long before gay bashing had reached epidemic proportions. By the time of Shepard's murder, the FBI was recording more than 2,000 anti-gay attacks every year. Because of reliance on a voluntary reporting system, the actual number was far higher. Of course, as the Shepard murder made all too clear, one was too many.

In Shepard, the media found the perfect victim. The diminutive college student, the son of upper-middle class parents, radiated a kind of wholesomeness to which Americans could relate. With its crucifixion-like scenario, the murder took on biblical overtones. Indeed, it was the religious right's virulently anti-gay rhetoric turned on its head. This time, it was an innocent, almost angelic, gay man who'd been betrayed by demonic straight men. For the religious right, the timing could not have been worse. The murder took place one day before a group calling itself Center for Reclaiming Christ had launched a round of "ex-gay" advertising, a series of television spots urging gays and lesbians to "repent." Reporters jumped on the connection between the ads and the prejudice that lurked behind Shepard's murder.

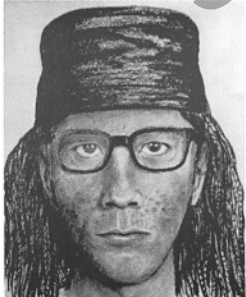
Yet the widespread reporting had a double edge: Why had Shepard's death been deemed worthier of coverage than the previous hundreds, perhaps thousands, of gay men who had their lives taken by gay bashers? And journalists were still reluctant to ask the tough questions: How on earth did young men like Henderson and McKinney develop a murderous antipathy to gay men? Since Henderson and McKinney were prohibited by the court from talking, Americans learned little about their background or their attitudes and biases. More generally, what were the sociological roots of the problem? What, exactly, is the relationship between anti-gay preachments and violence? How could the nation be mobilized against murderous anti-gay fury when a powerful conservative constituency was still insisting, against the evidence of 30 years of medical research, that homosexuality itself was the problem?

Produced one year before Shepard's slaying, Arthur Dong's prescient *Licensed to Kill* to this day remains among the very few serious journalistic attempts to tackle these profound questions. Dong's strategy is as simple as it is chilling: go directly to the source. In a series of prison interviews with convicted killers of homosexuals, the relationship between animus and violence begins to reveal itself. Dong elicits answers so unfiltered that they seem to spring from the unconscious.

Take Jeffrey Swinford, convicted in the killing of Chris Miller, a 23-year-old drag performer. "In eighth grade science class," he casually explains to the camera at an east Arkansas correction facility, "I remember my... science teacher Miss Blume, she [said] pick a subject, you know, something you don't approve of and why. So I went to the librarian. She sent me to the encyclopedia to

\$ REWARD \$


The Minneapolis Police Department is requesting the public's assistance in identifying and locating the suspect described below in connection with the murder of Joel Larson in Loring Park on July 31, 1991.



- Male, 22-24 years old
- 6' tall 140-145 lbs.
- Thin build, narrow face
- Yellow/olive rough complexion
- Shoulder-length black hair
- Wearing black framed glasses


(ARTIST SKETCH OF SUSPECT)

If YOU know someone matching this description or have information about this murder call:



Minneapolis Police Homicide
673-2941

OR



45-CRIME