# VIEWING GUIDE



# VALENTINE ROAD

AN HBO DOCUMENTARY FILM

RESOURCES FROM







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# INTRODUCTION

# MESSAGE FROM ELIZA BYARD, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF GLSEN

On February 12, 2008, all of us at GLSEN got word of a terrible tragedy unfolding in Oxnard, California. An eighthgrade student named Lawrence "Larry" King was on life support after being shot in the head by a classmate, Brandon McInerney, during their first period English class. Larry died two days later, on Valentine's Day.

Over time, we learned the agonizing details of Larry and Brandon's lives, and their collision at E.O. Greene Junior High School. GLSEN responded to calls from students across the country and supported the organization of hundreds of vigils for Larry. GLSEN's National Day of Silence that April was dedicated to Larry's memory, and millions learned of his story that day. The justice system began its slow grind through Brandon's case, prolonging the anguish of the families, their communities and advocates everywhere who sought answers and remedies for the future. *Valentine Road* tells this story in striking terms, reviving painful memories and calling us all to action.

This guide is intended to frame some of the critical issues raised by the film and suggest directions for dialogue among both students and adults. **Because** of the painful nature of the story and the responses documented in *Valentine Road*, we provide guidance for creating safe environments for productive conversation on a range of potentially emotional topics.

The film raises tough questions about bias and violence directed at lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and gender nonconforming youth in K–12 schools; about the power of gender norms and the ways they are enforced, whatever an individual's identity; about

the ability of schools to respond to the full complexity of students' lives, providing support to enable their success; and about the ways that schools and adults must support students in crisis before tragedy strikes.

Five years later, the central facts of this story remain the same: homophobia is at the core of what killed Larry King and destroyed Brandon McInerney's life, and in some cases adults failed both Larry and Brandon because of their own inability to deal with the multiple challenges they each faced. For both youth and adult audiences, it is critical to frame the difficult emotional issues raised by the film, help create safe environments for productive conversation, and suggest directions for action in response. With this guide, my colleagues and I hope to spark momentum for progress, so that Larry King will have a legacy beyond our enduring sadness.

We have made significant progress on LGBT issues in K-12 schools since Larry's death, in part as a consequence of public outrage and distress at his murder. Yet our embattled schools still struggle to provide every student with the support and the opportunities they deserve. Take this guide, start a conversation and help direct your community toward action. Let us find common cause in the effort to help every student thrive, whoever they may grow up to be.

With respect.

De Bal

Eliza Byard, PhD

#### SUMMARY OF **VALENTINE ROAD**

Valentine Road explores the murder of a teenager who had begun exploring his gender expression, revealing the circumstances that led to the shocking crime, as well as its complicated aftermath.

Directed and produced by first-time filmmaker Marta Cunningham and shepherded by award-winning producers Sasha Alpert (HBO's "Autism: The Musical") and Eddie Schmidt (HBO's "Twist of Faith"), the film raises issues about the safety of LGBT teens, juvenile justice and the ability of the country's educational and social service systems to prevent such tragedies.

In many ways, Larry and Brandon couldn't have been more different, yet they also had much in common. Larry, who was multiracial, had become increasingly open about exploring his gender identity, and had recently started wearing makeup and heeled boots to school. Brandon, who was Caucasian, had a girlfriend and displayed a growing interest in white supremacist ideology. However, both had difficult childhoods. Larry had recently been transferred to a residential center for youth, while Brandon was exposed to drug abuse and violence at home.

Valentine Road features interviews with a broad range of people whose lives were touched by the killing, including students who witnessed the murder; Brandon's mother, brothers and girlfriend; defense attorneys Robyn Bramson and Scott Wippert; prosecutor Maeve Fox; Oxnard homicide detective Jeff Kay; teachers who knew both Larry and Brandon; and jurors from Brandon's trial. Their candid comments highlight the complexities of the case.



Valentine Road is a BMP Films (the film division of Bunim/ Murray Productions) production in association with Eddie Schmidt Productions; directed and produced by Marta Cunningham; produced by Sasha Alpert & Eddie Schmidt; director of photography, Arlene Nelson; editor, Tchavdar Georgiev; consulting editor, Yana Gorskaya; music supervisors, Dave Stone & Justin Gage; associate producer, Kevin McSeveney; executive producers, Jonathan Murray & Gil Goldschein. For HBO: supervising producer, Lisa Heller; executive producer, Sheila Nevins.

Valentine Road was an official selection in the U.S. Documentary Competition at the 2013 Sundance Film Festival and has won numerous awards on the festival circuit, including Miami's Gay and Lesbian Film Festival for Best Documentary and Frameline Film Festival's Jury Award for Outstanding Documentary.

## ABOUT THIS VIEWING GUIDE

GLSEN and HBO have created this resource to help guide these important discussions in a meaningful, purposeful and safe way. In the following pages, you will find guidance on how to use *Valentine Road*, how to discuss the film, additional resources for educators and students and suggested actions to create and sustain respectful, healthful and safe school environments.

This resource is designed to be used by educators and student leaders working together to positively impact their school communities.

# WHY DISCUSS **VALENTINE ROAD?**

Valentine Road tells an important story, one that leaves many questions unanswered about how our schools and communities deal with bullying, name-calling, bias, discrimination and violence based on sexual orientation, gender identity, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status and other personal characteristics. It also calls attention to the realities that face young people living in unstable, violent and abusive environments.

Most of all, *Valentine Road* compels us to examine our ideals of justice. What led to this terrible tragedy? What interventions could have changed the outcome? Who is responsible and what price should they pay?



FOR EDUCATORS who watch and discuss the film with colleagues, *Valentine Road* provides an opportunity to examine the real story and make connections back to their schools. In what ways are the students portrayed in the film similar to your own? How can you best support individual students at risk of being the targets or perpetrators of bullying and violence? And what must school communities do to foster respect, understanding and safety for all students?



FOR STUDENTS, with appropriate guidance and support, who watch and discuss *Valentine Road* with their peers, the stories of Larry and Brandon can be tools for empowerment and resilience. Where did Larry find the internal strength to be himself? How have his friends grown form telling Larry's story? How has Brandon come to terms with the murder he committed? And what can students do to ensure that all members of their school community feel welcome and safe?

# PREPARING FOR VALENTINE ROAD

VALENTINE ROAD CONTAINS SEVERAL SCENES THAT ARE QUITE GRAPHIC AND MAY BE UPSETTING TO SOME VIEWERS. YOUR GROUP WILL WITNESS DISTURBING CRIME SCENE AND MORGUE PHOTOS, VIOLENCE AND PAINFUL TESTIMONY.



#### SHOWING THIS FILM SHOULD BE DONE WITH THE UTMOST CARE AND THOUGHT.

## CONSIDER YOUR AUDIENCE AND GOALS

The real-life stories of Larry King and Brandon McInerney, as depicted in *Valentine Road*, can be powerful vehicles for discussion, learning and action.

The first step to planning a group showing of the film is to clarify your goals in doing so. Take time to reflect on the impact the film may have on your audience and what you want them to get out of the experience. You can use the film and the ensuing discussion to increase awareness, examine your school climate and create safe and affirming learning environments for all students.

Educators and students, alike, may benefit from exploring the issues at play in the film and connecting those issues to their own schools. However, the make-up of your audience will create a unique set of opportunities and challenges when watching and discussing the film.

#### SOME EXAMPLES OF HOW *VALENTINE ROAD* CAN BE USED IN YOUR SCHOOL:

# **EDUCATORS**

Watch and discuss Valentine Road:

- As a staff, department or leadership team during professional development time to address LGBT issues, bullying and violence.
- In a professional learning community (PLC) to learn about the experiences and needs of LGBT students.
- Amongst a group of school social work and mental health professionals.
- With students in upper-level electives focused on law, government or social justice.

# **STUDENTS**

Watch and discuss Valentine Road:

- With members of your high school Gay-Straight Alliance, social justice or diversity club.
- In collaboration with teachers, parents and/or administrators as a way to highlight the needs of LGBT students.
- At an LGBT-friendly youth group event focused on empowerment and social action.

## CONSIDER THE SAFETY AND NEEDS OF YOUR AUDIENCE

The tragic stories of Larry and Brandon will be painful for some of your audience members to watch. They may empathize strongly with people in the story. They may also have strong emotional reactions and be triggered by memories or current realities of their own.

For student viewers, in particular, we strongly recommend having supportive staff, school counselors or mental health professionals present for any viewing and discussion. For guidance, see the following section, Supporting Student Viewers: Before, During and After the Film (pages 6 - 8).

#### WITH THIS IN MIND, CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING:

- Be thoughtful about who you invite to your event, especially if that includes student viewers.
- Watch the film before your event, so you are prepared for audience reactions.
- Warn your audience about the content before the film begins, so they know what to expect.
- Follow the Guided Discussion Questions (starting on **page 9** and **page 11**) outlined in this guide. They have been developed by experts to examine the issues of the film in a safe, supportive and educational way.
- Keep an eye out during the film for those who are particularly impacted by the content. Make sure they have the support they need.
- Provide an ample supply of tissues. Some audience members will cry.

# SUPPORTING BEFORE THE FILM

Before showing *Valentine Road* to a group of youth, consider the following suggestions to ensure a safe, impactful and meaningful experience for everyone.



#### SET CLEAR OBJECTIVES

Know what you want students to get out of watching the film. Think about what you want your audience to think, feel and do after watching the film. Focus on positive themes, like resilience and empowerment.



#### **IDENTIFY A GROUP OF STUDENTS**

Give some thought to your invite list. For example, students who already demonstrate an interest in LGBT issues, like GSA members, are likely to benefit greatly from the film.



#### KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Everyone who watches *Valentine Road* will have a different reaction. Be careful, though, to consider the students in your group and their experiences with the subject matter. In particular, if someone has been targeted for bullying and violence in the past, they may need extra support before, during and after the film (see pages 6 – 8).



#### PLAN AHEAD

Take the necessary time to make your event great. Preview the film. Design an agenda with your objectives in mind and build in enough time for adequate discussion afterwards. Find a space that is quiet and comfortable.



#### CHOOSE A FACILITATOR

It's important to select a strong facilitator to lead the discussion after the film. You may want to pair up a student leader with an adult.



#### COMMUNICATE

Let your group know about the film and your objectives for the discussion before the event. Be honest about why it might be hard for some people to watch and allow anyone to opt out for any reason.

# SUPPORTING DURING THE FILM

During the group viewing, take time to set the tone and guide your youth audience in a meaningful and supportive way.



#### STATE YOUR OBJECTIVES

Before you start the film, explain why the topics raised are important to discuss and how they connect to your school. Let everyone know what your goals are and what you hope they will get out of the experience.



#### FRAME THE FILM AND GUIDE VIEWING

Take time to set up the film following the Framing the Experience section. Suggest a theme, share a quote or ask a question to give your audience a clear lens through which to view the film. Consider passing out paper, pens and markers and encourage students to write or draw the feelings, thoughts and questions that come up for them as they watch the film.



#### **ENCOURAGE SELF-CARE**

Ask everyone to pay attention to their feelings while watching the film and to practice self-care. Let them know that they can take a break outside, go to the bathroom or ask for support at any time.

And, whether you are a student or educator, make sure to take good care of yourself too.



#### KEEP AN EYE OUT

Valentine Road will elicit a lot of emotion from your audience. Pay attention to those that you know may react strongly and keep an eye out for anyone that seems to be really upset.



#### INVITE A COUNSELOR

We strongly encourage you to have a counselor or other mental health professional present when you watch the film. They can help set the tone, work with individuals who need a break during the film and provide guidance to those feeling particularly sad, angry or scared afterwards.



#### TAKE BREAKS

Consider watching the film in segments or taking a break if your audience needs it, to make sure everyone gets the support they need. After the break, refocus the group on the objectives and continue with the film.



#### **BRING TISSUE**

The stories of Larry and Brandon are sad. People in your group may cry and that is OK. Quietly hand them tissue and ask if they need anything.

# SUPPORTING AFTER THE FILM

After watching the film, ensure that everyone has the time and space to process their reactions, learn from the experience and leave feeling supported and with resources in hand.



#### TAKE A DEEP BREATH

Immediately following the film, encourage your group to take a deep breath, stand up or stretch. This will ease some of the tension before you begin the discussion.



#### **ENCOURAGE COMPASSION**

You are in this together. Take care of each other and make sure everyone feels welcome and supported.



Find out how everyone is doing. Consider going around the room and inviting students to share one word that describes how they are feeling or what they are thinking.

Remember that it is always OK to pass, so no one has to share if they don't want to.



#### HAVE A BUDDY SYSTEM

It would be great to know that everyone has at least one person they can talk to when they leave. Consider setting up a buddy system and encourage buddies to check-in with each other after the film and in the following days.



#### FOLLOW YOUR AGENDA

Consider your stated objectives and lead the group in a discussion using relevant Guided Discussion Questions (starting on **page 9** and **page 11**). Try to keep the group on topic and move them towards empowerment and action.



#### FOLLOW-UP

Work to connect with each individual in the days that follow the film to make sure they have the supports they need. This is particularly important for students who had strong reactions to the film or those that leave feeling scared or alone.



#### FOCUS ON RESILIENCE AND ACTION

Valentine Road is tragic. But it can also be inspiring. Try to keep your group focused on the good they can do in your school and community.



#### MAKE IT COUNT

During the discussion and in subsequent meetings, lead the group to action. Brainstorm big and small ways to make your school more safe, affirming and welcoming to all students and set an action plan. Use the film and discussion as a stepping stone to change.



### KEEP AN EYE OUT

The discussion may bring up additional memories or emotions from members of your group. Just like during the film, pay attention to who might need additional support or a break. Have the counselor or mental health professional talk with them off to the side, if necessary.



#### PROVIDE RESOURCES

Everyone should leave the film with a copy of places and people they can contact for support. You can use the handout in this resource and supplement it with local groups. It is very important that each student know where to find additional support if they need it.

# LEARNING FROM *VALENTINE ROAD*

## FRAMING THE EXPERIENCE FOR STUDENTS

For students who watch *Valentine Road* there is a great opportunity to use the stories of Larry and Brandon to focus on resilience and empower them to make their own school communities safer and more respectful. The film shows the devastation that follows bias, prejudice and violence but it also highlights the power of students to be themselves, support each other and make a difference.

Introduce the film and share the objectives you've set for the event. Follow the recommendation in the section called, **Supporting Student Viewers: Before, During and After the Film (pages 6 – 8)**. You may want to invite students to focus on one objective or theme as they watch the film to help guide their experience. Let them know that they will see and hear things that may be quite painful and that they should try to practice good self-care and get support from the counselor in the room (or a friend) if they need it.

# **GUIDED DISCUSSION FOR STUDENTS**

Following the film, allow a few minutes for students to gather their thoughts and reflect on the film, as suggested in **Supporting Student Viewers: Before, During and After the Film (pages 6 - 8)**.

Lead a large group discussion using some of the discussion questions below. Work to help students process their response to the film, move them towards meeting the stated objectives, and leave them feeling strong and empowered to make a difference in their school.

# SUGGESTED **STUDENT** DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (PART 1 OF 2)

- 1
- How many of you have heard the story of Larry and Brandon before?
- What new things did you learn?
- What new questions do you have?
- What do you think were the main themes of the film?
- 2
- Resilience can be defined as the ability to be strong, even when bad things happen to you.
- How did Larry demonstrate resilience?
- How did his friends and other LGBT students in the film demonstrate resilience?
- 3
- There were several teachers featured in *Valentine Road*. Some were more supportive than others, especially of how he was expressing his gender.
- If you could talk to any of them, what would you suggest they do to make their school more supportive and safer for all students?

### SUGGESTED **STUDENT** DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (PART 2 OF 2)

- 4
- Several of Larry's friends described him as brave, like one student who said, "I don't think
  people realize how brave Larry was, like, being out to that many people, like, it's must have
  been, like, extremely difficult."
- What words would you use to describe Larry?
- 5
- In what ways was your middle school similar to or different from E.O. Green Junior High School?
- Was there bullying and name-calling?
- If so, what did it look like and (without naming names) what groups of students were targeted more than others?
- 6
- How are LGBT students treated at your school now?
- Is it safe to be "out" as lesbian, gay or bisexual?
- Is it safe to be "out" as transgender or gender nonconforming?
- What could your school do to be a safer and more affirming place for all students?
- What can students, like you, do to make your school better?
- 7
- At one point in the film one student says, "I think that [Larry] was born in the wrong age. Hopefully, within the next 100 years, it will be perfectly acceptable, without the totally disgusting circumstances that I've had to grow up with."
- What do you hope schools and communities will be like for LGBT people in the future?
- What can be done to make that hope a reality?
- 8
- In the beginning of the film, one student says, "We all learned a lot about life through this, and I know people on the outside have learned a lot about themselves through this."
- What have you learned from watching and discussing Valentine Road?
- What might you do differently now in school and in life?
- 9
- What should we do now?
- How can we build upon Larry's legacy and work together to make a difference?

### FRAMING THE EXPERIENCE FOR EDUCATORS

For educators who watch *Valentine Road* there is a great opportunity to use the stories of Larry and Brandon to examine how bias, prejudice, bullying and violence play out in each and every school. More than that, it's an opportunity to inspire educators into action.

Introduce the film and share the goals you've set for the event. Ask the audience to think of their own students and community as they watch *Valentine Road*. Let them know that they will see and hear things that may be quite painful and that they are encouraged to practice good self-care.

# GUIDED DISCUSSION FOR EDUCATORS

Following the film, allow a few minutes for viewers to gather their thoughts and reflect on the film. You may want to invite them to share their initial reactions and feelings with someone sitting next to them, or write them in a journal.

Lead a large group discussion using some of the discussion questions below. Work to help your audience process their response to the film, move them towards the goals you initially set out, and leave them feeling empowered to make a difference in the lives of their students.

#### SUGGESTED **EDUCATOR** DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (PART 1 OF 2)

- 1
- Valentine Road highlights several educators who knew Larry.
- What do you think made some educators more supportive than others of how Larry was expressing his gender?
- In what ways might students like Larry benefit from educators who support and affirm their identities?
- 2
- Several of Larry's friends described him as brave, like one student who said, "I don't think
  people realize how brave Larry was, like, being out to that many people, like, it's must have
  been, like, extremely difficult."
- How are LGBT students treated at your school?
- Is it safe to be "out"?
- 3
- Valentine Road explores concepts of identity related to sexual orientation, gender, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status and others.
- What role did identity play in the story?
- For Larry and Brandon?
- For others in the film?

### SUGGESTED **EDUCATOR** DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (PART 2 OF 2)

- 4
- Reflecting back on the story, what were the "red flags" or "warning signs" that you noticed before the shooting?
- How might your school have responded to similar signs?
- 5
- What messages might Brandon have received that led him to seem so "offended" and "disgusted" by Larry's asking him to be his Valentine?
- What messages do your students get about LGBT people?
- 6
- Resilience could be said to be an underlying theme in the film.
- How did Larry demonstrate resilience?
- How did his friends and other LGBT students in the film demonstrate resilience?
- How can educators help students build resilience in the face of adversity?
- 7
- Much was said about Larry's gender expression in the film. Some people called him brave for being himself despite the opposition he faced. Others considered him attention-seeking, threatening and even dangerous.
- What words would you use to describe Larry?
- What can educators do to support and affirm gender nonconforming students while ensuring their safety?
- 8
- Towards the end of the film, one of the jurors in the kitchen says of Brandon, "He had a plan to resolve this terrible problem, because no one was taking care of this problem." It is a sentiment echoed by several people in the film.
- Why do you think Brandon resorted to violence?
- How can you make sure your students see that they have better options?
- 9
- In the beginning of the film, one student says, "We all learned a lot about life through this, and I know people on the outside have learned a lot about themselves through this."
- What have you learned from watching and discussing Valentine Road?
- What might you do differently now in your classroom, school or community?

# RESPONDING TO VALENTINE ROAD

# STUDENT ACTIONS AND RESOURCES HANDOUT

Now that you've watched and discussed Valentine Road, take action to create change in your school!



#### If you have **FIVE MINUTES**...

- Share a Safe Space Kit with an educator ally.
- Register your GSA.
- Tweet @GLSEN and tell us how you're creating change in your school.



#### If you have **ONE DAY...**

- Participate in GLSEN's National Day of Silence.
- Download and deliver a copy of GLSEN's Ready, Set, Respect! elementary toolkit to your alma mater.



## If you have **ONE HOUR...**

- Connect with your local GLSEN Chapter.
- Read or share Know your Rights: A Guide for Trans and Gender Nonconforming Students.



#### If you have **ONE WEEK...**

- Participate in Ally Week in October.
- Be an Ally to Trans and Gender Nonconforming Students.



#### **ONGOING ACTIONS**

- Check out Transgender Student Rights (TSR), a grassroots student-created organization, working to create safer spaces for trans and gender nonconforming students.
- Join your school's GSA! If your school doesn't have one, start it yourself!
- **Learn** about the impact of GSAs.

# NEED HELP OR SOMEONE TO TALK TO?

#### THE TREVOR LIFELINE

Call **1-866-488-7386**, to connect with a trained volunteer counselor who is ready to listen. It's free, confidential and available 24/7. The Trevor Lifeline is the only nationwide, around-the-clock crisis and suicide prevention lifeline for LGBTQ youth. Find out more at **www.thetrevorproject.org.** 

#### NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION LIFELINE

Call **1-800-273-TALK (8255)** to connect with a skilled, trained counselor at a crisis center in your area, anytime 24/7. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress. Find out more at **www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org.** 

For more information and to download the resources above, visit:

**GLSEN.ORG/VALENTINEROAD** 

# RESPONDING TO VALENTINE ROAD

# EDUCATOR ACTIONS AND RESOURCES HANDOUT (PART 1 OF 2)

Now that you've watched and discussed Valentine Road, take action to create change in your school!



#### LEARN

Examine current data on the experiences of LGBT students in school, understand the safe schools laws in your state and consider how policy impacts school climate.

- Read GLSEN's National School Climate Survey for current data and trends related to LGBT students in school.
- Check out GLSEN's **Policy State Maps** to find the anti-bullying and nondiscrimination laws in your state.
- Explore GLSEN's **Model School Policy** for promising practices and procedures to improve school climate.



#### ACT

Support student leaders and advocate for change.

- Check out Transgender Student Rights (TSR), a grassroots student-created organization, working to create safer spaces for trans and gender nonconforming students.
- Encourage your students to celebrate Ally Week each October.
- Support and advocate for your students on National Day of Silence each April.
- Gather information on the experiences of your students with GLSEN's Local School Climate Survey.
- Make sure to continue the conversation with your colleagues and administration.



#### TEACH

Create and sustain respectful, safe and healthy learning environments for all your students.

- Find out how to be an ally to LGBT middle and high school students with GLSEN's Safe Space Kit.
- Create respectful elementary school climate with tips, guided reflection and lesson plans in GLSEN's Ready, Set, Respect! elementary toolkit.
- Visit the Educator Resources section of GLSEN's website for educator guides and lessons on LGBT history and themes, as well as name-calling and bullying.
- Celebrate Kindness with GLSEN's No Name Calling Week each January. Find resources and lessons to create respectful classroom.
- Watch the GLSEN webinar to ensure that your transgender and gender nonconforming students are safe and supported.
- Pay attention to the unique experiences of LGBT students of color and find ways to better support them with GLSEN's Considerations When Working with LGBT Students of Color.

For more information and to download the resources above, visit:

GLSEN.ORG/VALENTINEROAD

# RESPONDING TO VALENTINE ROAD

# EDUCATOR ACTIONS AND RESOURCES HANDOUT (PART 2 OF 2)

Now that you've watched and discussed Valentine Road, take action to create change in your school!



#### CONNECT

Engage with fellow educators and find support in-person and online.

- Connect with a GLSEN Chapter near you for support, resources and training.
- Join GLSEN's Educator Network to participate in the largest network of K-12 educators working to create safe, supportive school environments for LGBT students.
- Ask questions, share best practices and discuss LGBT issues with other educators on the GLSEN Educator Forum on Facebook.
- Keep up to date on LGBT issues in schools, GLSEN resources and opportunities for learning via Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr.

For more information and to download the resources above, visit:

**GLSEN.ORG/VALENTINEROAD**