

AN INITIATIVE OF



DOCUMENTARY POWER  
RESEARCH INSTITUTE

# MAKING SOCIAL CHANGE WITH DOCUMENTARIES: What Works, Why and How?: A Case Study



## PRAY AWAY

Centering Wellness, Valuing Care,  
and Creating Supportive Spaces

SPRING 2024

“What are the resources needed to create safe community screenings and how could we support facilitators to be thinking about what a care environment would be for having a screening on more of a community level?”

Anya Rous  
Impact Producer  
Pray Away



# A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

As both an outcome and a set of activities, making social impact through documentary storytelling has changed enormously over the past decade. It isn't an understatement to say that the entire environment in which filmmakers and impact producers create has seen fundamental change over the last few years, due to major disruptions made by rising social movements and the arrival of new funding powers, distributors, and engagement platforms. At such a juncture, an initiative from the Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI) raises the following key questions: What does social impact in documentary entail today? What are the current challenges? What lessons and models of the past are being brought forward and which ones are being overlooked? What does success look like in this work and how do we define it?

This case study centers this pursuit by engaging with the film *PRAY AWAY*, selected by an advisory committee of eight leading filmmakers and impact producers, as providing a useful perspective into the features, lessons, and experiences of impact work within documentary film today. In addition to documenting the features of an exemplary impact campaign, this case study offers a set of best practices, tools, resources, and thinking around wellness for other filmmakers and those engaged or interested in the field of documentary impact to learn from. This case study is based on conversations with key members of the film and impact campaign team around their experiences working on this impact campaign.

This report is one of five case studies published by the Documentary Power Research Institute at the Center for Media & Social Impact. For more information on other case studies, resources and reports being produced by this research, please visit:

[cmsimpact.org/program/documentary-power-research-institute/](https://cmsimpact.org/program/documentary-power-research-institute/)

---

\* Following several successful existing working groups across the documentary ecology, this study began by establishing a collaborative working group of eight people. This group was created to help shape the design of its core questions; provide insights and valuable guidance in designing the study (including in identifying selection criteria and recommendations for the interview population); inform the analysis process (including in the identification of the most meaningful and significant findings for the field); and support in socializing and leading the broader campaign for adoption and understanding yielded by this work. As part of the larger documentary study in which this research sits, this group met at core junctures in the research program to shape the design and implementation of this work and to select this case study. More information on this advisory group can be found here: <https://cmsimpact.org/documentary-power-research-institute-team/>





## SECTIONS OF CASE STUDY

- 4** The Film (an overview)
- 5** The Impact Campaign (an overview)
- 9** Centering Wellness and Valuing Care as an Impact Objective Key Learnings
- 21** Key Resources

# THE FILM



## The Film: *Pray Away*

PRAY AWAY is a documentary film that investigates and exposes the practice of LGBTQ+ conversion therapy and the 'ex-LGBTQ+ movement' through the lens of the largest conversion therapy organization to date, Exodus International. The film features intimate profiles of ex-leaders and a survivor of "conversion therapy" who speak out about its harm and devastating persistence.

## Synopsis of Film

"I lived transgender, but I left it all to follow Jesus." So explains self-identified 'ex-trans' Jeffrey, whose belief that change is possible reflects the core message of the conversion therapy movement today.

In the 1970s, five men struggling with being gay in their Evangelical church started a bible study to help each other leave the "homosexual lifestyle." They quickly received over 25,000 letters from people asking for help and formalized as Exodus International, the largest and most controversial conversion therapy organization in the world.

Julie is one of hundreds of thousands of people caught in Exodus' wake. When she came out at sixteen, her mom took her to a residential conversion therapy program where she spent the next decade going through weekly psychological, behavioral, and religious counseling to make her straight.










But leaders struggled with a secret: their own "same-sex attractions" never went away. After years as Christian superstars in the religious right, many have come out as LGBTQ+, disavowing the very movement they helped start. PRAY AWAY chronicles that movement's rise to power, persistent influence, and the harm it causes.





# THE IMPACT CAMPAIGN

## Key impact goals of campaign

-  Support the leading national, regional, and local organizations in ending conversion therapy.
-  Improve understanding that conversion therapy is not a single story, or fringe practice; it is a pervasive practice in the US and around the world that harms hundreds of thousands of LGBTQ+ individuals and is part of a much broader movement that fuels anti-LGBTQ+ policies and behavior.
-  Raise awareness that while key legislative action are essential, state bans are insufficient in ending conversion therapy, since the majority of conversion therapy happens in religious spaces that can't be regulated due to religious freedom protections in the US. Culture change strategies are essential to ending conversion therapy.
-  Bolster localized efforts addressing conversion therapy and challenging anti-LGBTQ+ policies.
-  Engage affirming religious communities to more publicly challenge conversion therapy in their broader communities, and to understand and welcome survivors into their communities.
-  At the time of the film's release, contribute to a shift in how conversion therapy is covered in the media and understood on a community level, taking a clear-eyed look at its lasting harms on those it targets.
-  Offer advocates for LGBTQ+ equality and dignity an understanding of the mechanisms that propel the practice of conversion therapy around the world so that they can be more fully equipped to address them.
-  Shine a light on the relationship between gender and sexuality change efforts and campaigns for regressive anti-LGBTQ+ policies of the ideological right.
-  Offer resources for families of faith in understanding the harm of this practice so they can choose affirming ways to respond when their loved ones come out.

The film and impact campaign were made possible through the financial support of several key partners, including: Drake Bettner Foundation, deNovo Initiative, Perspective Fund, and others.



PERSPECTIVE  
inspiring change through film

### PRAY AWAY RESOURCES:

[www.prayawayfilm.com/resources](http://www.prayawayfilm.com/resources)



## A Key Understanding/Challenge of the Impact Work

A driving intervention and goal of the film and its impact activities centered around building more public awareness about the pervasiveness of conversion therapy and engaging young people who are most vulnerable to it.

One of the challenges that the impact and film team learned early-on is that the places where conversion therapy happens most regularly is in religious communities that find cover under freedom of religious protections. Consequently, a lot of well-meaning legislative advocacy and reform is only able to address a small footprint of where conversion therapy is happening. As a result, the PRAY AWAY team decided that a key advocacy objective needed to be improving larger understanding about the fact that conversion therapy is not a single story, a historic story, or a fringe practice; instead, it is part of a much broader movement around anti-LGBTQ+ policy that legislative bans do not end.

From a community engagement and impact perspective, this early understanding meant that the film and impact team saw the importance of community events that could be located at the intersection of faith communities (particularly Christian communities) and advocacy, and that they would be most effective in cities where conversion therapy is particularly prevalent and where the team had strong relationships with local groups. In this way, the impact work around PRAY AWAY reflects the incredible challenge of an initiative that endeavored to support meaningful local impact strategies and movements, while also recognizing the reality that the film would be seen in homes around the world (since its distributor was Netflix).

Another central aspect of this goal was offering viewers – and in particular advocates for LGBTQ+ dignity and those working to end the practice – with an understanding of how power worked in the conversion therapy movement. They focused on stories of leaders of the movement -- people who claimed to have changed from gay to straight, or from transgender to cisgender -- who ran these “ex-LGBTQ+” organizations, promising they could ‘help’ others do the same. The team wanted to highlight how the movement relies on the internalization of homophobia and transphobia wielded outwards, harming many people in its wake. They wanted people to understand that without larger culture change work to challenge gender and sexuality oppression, the ‘ex-LGBTQ+’ movement will continue.

The team was also conscientious about the fact that key leadership of Exodus International – the largest and most influential conversion therapy organization in the world that was discussed in the film – was overwhelmingly white and male. PRAY AWAY reveals this, while also noting how racial and ethnic identities, as well as femme-women, were exploited through tokenization by the movement. They wanted to show the stark contrast between the “old guard” of leadership and the intersectionality of today’s millennial-driven “CHANGED” Movement – especially when it comes to race, ethnicity, and class, though the underlying ideology remains the same.

While the team crafted the film with these power dynamics in mind, from the outset the team members wanted to center survivors and others directly impacted by this practice through their community engagement campaign and social media, including a “Survivor Series” depicting stories across racial and gender identities to show the range of ways that conversion therapy is practiced and experienced across communities.



## Timeline of film release and impact work

- **2021**  
first screening at Tribeca 2021
- **August 2021**  
released on Netflix
- **Summer 2021**  
impact campaign begins, but many in-person screening and community events are put on hold because of COVID-19
- **November 2021**  
first in-person engagement event is held in Atlanta, Georgia
- **Nov. 2021 – May 2023**  
nine city impact campaign in communities around the US

## Key partners



**Q Christian Fellowship**

*Cumulatively worked with **160 partners** throughout the campaign that included local, regional, and national partners for each event*

## Key members of impact team

**Kristine Stolakis**  
*Director/Producer*

**Jess Devaney**  
*Producer*

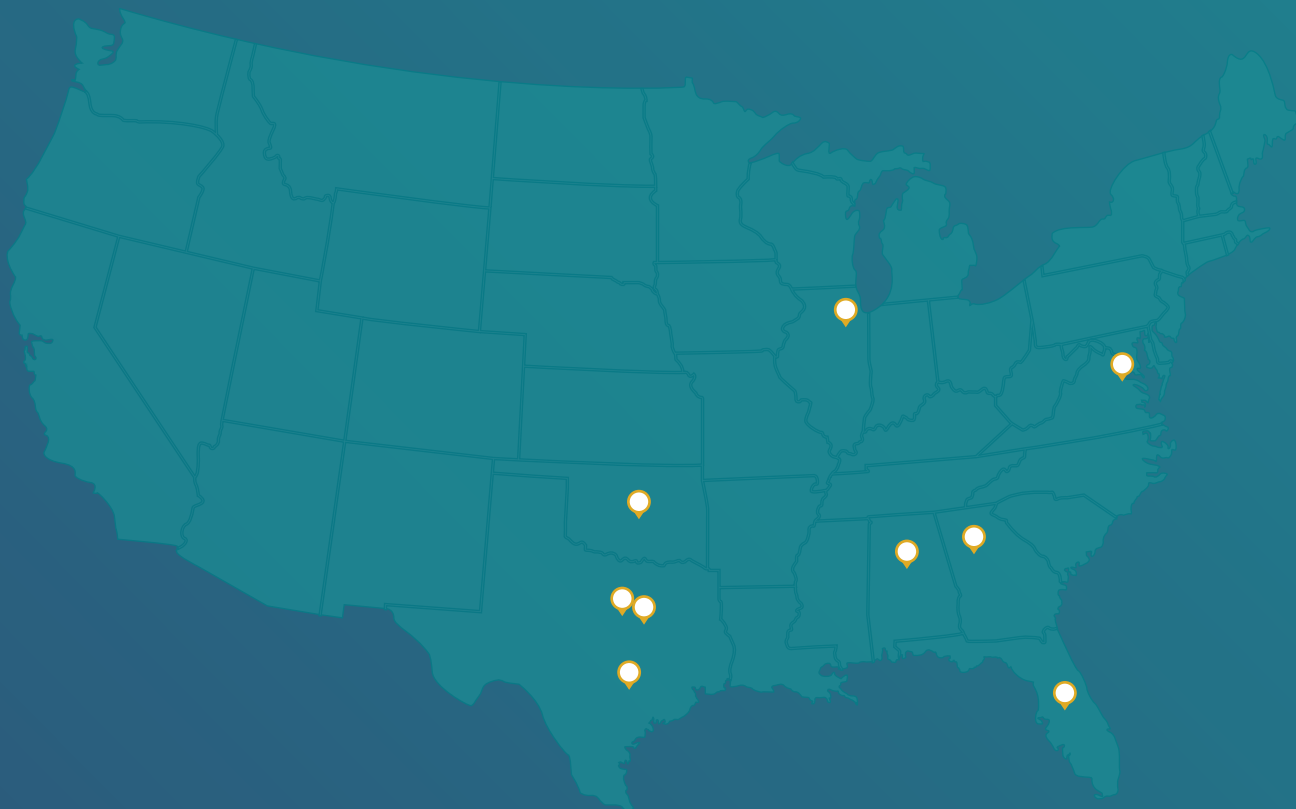
**Myles Markham**  
*Consulting Producer  
& Impact Producer*

**Shae Washington**  
*Impact Producer*

**Anya Rous**  
*Producer*

## Locations of impact screenings

- Austin (University of Texas at Austin)
- Atlanta (Morningside Presbyterian Church)
- Birmingham (Sidewalk Cinema)
- Chicago (United Church of Hyde Park)
- Dallas (Life in Deep Ellum)
- DC (Busboys and Poets)
- Fort Worth (Stage West Theater)
- Oklahoma City (Rodeo Cinema)
- Orlando (The Renaissance Theater)





# GOING BEYOND THE COMMUNITY SCREENING PANEL

Centering Wellness and Valuing Care as an Impact Objective



## Overview of section

Several filmmakers and impact producers engaged by the larger research in which this case study emerged, noted that there is an urgent need for the documentary industry to give more attention to identifying and adopting protagonist and participant wellness models in social impact campaigns.

As multiple impact experts put it: too often, protagonists and participants are put at risk of further trauma and harm because organizers are not anticipating the emotional and mental labor that is required of them to participate in documentary impact screenings and events. The experiences and lessons from the film PRAY AWAY – which endeavored to root its impact strategy in carefully conceived models of participants wellness – stand to provide several important and urgently needed considerations and strategies for the field of documentary impact on this challenge.



## KEY LEARNINGS

Some of the perspectives and lessons around wellness that are offered by this case study include the following:

1

Centering wellness and creating supportive spaces for conversation and healing should be valued as vital impact objectives on their own, alongside traditional markers of reach, distribution, and policy outcomes.

4

With proper support and community leadership, conversations around traumatic issues can be transformed into empowering opportunities; without proper support, impact campaigns can exacerbate trauma for the communities they intend to serve.

7

If the film is going to be translated for non-English-speaking audiences, work with culturally-attuned translators to make sure trauma-informed messages and wellness guides are appropriately worded.

2

Wellness should not be an add-on consideration of impact work, developed at the end, just before a screening panel: discussions, planning, and considerations of wellness (and anticipating unintended consequences of a film or impact effort) must be centered from the outset.

5

Wellness means knowing who your audience is and who it is not – the participants and protagonists of any film should be a central audience that is valued and centered in any impact effort.

8

Panels and community events should be responsive to the needs of the participants. A participant might be willing to participate in a Q&A but they might not want the burden of needing to stay for further audience/ community interaction afterward (which isn't always helpful for participants).

3

Screening efforts shouldn't simply end with provocative discussion guides, they should involve the inclusion of engaging care team members (not just subject experts) to panels and provide support resources for participants and audiences.

6

Film and impact teams should consider the many spaces and contexts in which their film might be seen and prepare resources for those audiences. It shouldn't be enough to only consider the relatively small number of screenings that are organized by the film and impact teams, and to ignore the reality that most of the people who see your documentary will be outside of any event you organize. These resources should also be considered with an attention to care and mental health support, when relevant.

9

Bring media organizations into conversation around how their coverage could be contributing to misunderstanding and harm on the topic.

10

Screening and engagement events provide a unique opportunity to bring disparate groups together and create spaces for follow-up partnership.



## With proper support and community leadership/partnerships, documentary-centered conversations around traumatic issues can be transformed into empowering and skill-building opportunities

Anya Rous, producer of PRAY AWAY and advisor for its impact campaign, said that Director Kristine Stolakis and Jess Devaney, Anya's producing partner at Multitude Films,<sup>2</sup> started talking about a care-informed approach and impact priorities from the earliest conversations as Multitude Films was considering coming on to produce PRAY AWAY. Kristine had already begun developing relationships with National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR) and GLAAD in the development of the project and had also consulted with a Documentary Impact Strategist, Sahar Driver, to develop an initial impact plan. Multitude Films also prioritizes integrating impact from the earliest stages of productions, and brought recent experience and ongoing relationships in Christian affirming communities from its own impact campaign for LOVE THE SINNER, looking at homophobia in the Church in the wake of the Pulse massacre. They felt that the clear alignment between thinking about the possibilities for culture change, and a commitment to prioritizing the well-being of those directly impacted made the partnership a natural collaboration. This meant that, in addition to the usual production considerations (i.e. casting) they also placed an early emphasis on research and analysis to make sure that the film and its impact work would be grounded in the latest thinking from the movement to end conversion therapy (one of the primary goals of the film).

Central to this research process was expanding the number of perspectives and partners who informed the extensive research that informed the production and, later on, their planning conversations for the impact campaign, which included forming relationships with organizations like the National Center for Lesbian Rights, the Trevor Project, PFLAG, GLAAD and others who the film and impact team connected with for early guidance and partnership.

The team also brought on a Consulting Producer, Myles Markham, who had depth-of-issue expertise as an organizer working at the intersection of faith & LGBTQ+ inclusion for years and who had been following the movement. Myles was also a survivor of conversion therapy himself and remained connected to a broader community of survivors and Queer Christian communities. He was instrumental in working closely with Kristine and Multitude Films in casting, and in contributing to the storylines in the film and representations of the movement. (Myles ultimately grew into the Impact Producer for the community engagement campaign, charting the goals and strategies that would ultimately be helmed by another leader in the faith & LGBTQ+ facilitation world, Shae Washington.)

---

<sup>2</sup> Multitude Films is a queer- and women-led independent production company dedicated to telling nonfiction stories by and about historically excluded and underrepresented communities. More information on their work can be found at [www.multitudefilms.com](http://www.multitudefilms.com)

Wellness should not be an add-on consideration of impact work, developed at the end, just before a screening panel. Discussions, planning, and considerations of wellness (and anticipating unintended consequences of a film or impact effort) must be centered from the outset.

During this early stage of design and preparatory work around the impact campaign, a focus was placed on better understanding not only where the leadership and power in the conversion movement was located, but in considering all the ways that the issue causes harm, including from a mental health perspective, and how/why it is difficult for people to talk about. This dual-approach of (1) addressing external structures that are causing harm and need to change, (2) while not ever losing sight of considering the wellness and healing of the impacted participants and protagonists at the center of the film and conversation was critical.

As part of this effort, the team particularly leaned on the Trevor Project in being cognizant that “this is a high risk, vulnerable population with a lot of survivors who are dealing with PTSD symptoms from the ongoing reverberations of their experience with conversion therapy.” In the LGBTQ+ community generally, and especially among those who are survivors of conversion therapy, there are much higher rates of suicide or suicidal attempts and ideations about self-harm, along with people who have had direct experiences with having lost loved ones or close community members and have seen the harm of the conversion therapy movement up close. As a result, the team was especially concerned early-on with ensuring that the film and any engagement activities around it would orient around a care approach.

Screening efforts shouldn't simply end with provocative discussion guides, they should involve the inclusion of care team members (not just subject experts) to panels and provide support resources for participants and audiences

The impact team felt strongly that a care-oriented approach meant going beyond the traditional on-paper approach to impact (i.e. simply including a hand-out of supportive resources for people to take at the end of screening). Rather, it necessitated a focused effort of resourcing screening events with people who could provide instant support to audiences, and it meant creating a supportive environment of local organizations, therapists, and allies who were prepared ahead of time for any outcome of a screening event. More specifically, for the screenings that the film and impact team hosted, this meant involving **care teams** and not only bringing people with deep experience into the rooms to help them create safe-enough spaces for viewing and engagement, but also creating spaces for them to find continued care and support from qualified mental health professionals in their communities long after the screenings.

Myles included this in the impact campaign's first public screening. Shae Washington, Myles successor leading the campaign, built out and honed the model through the entirety of the campaign, and brought the community partners into this ethos from the beginning of organizing their local events together, including planning elements on the panels and identifying resources for attendees.





## Involve “Care Teams” at every screening and include a strategic and diverse selection of care team members

Within each care team, the film and impact team worked to include both mental health professionals, community leaders and people who could hold space and serve as allies to those directly impacted by the issues of the film.

**We knew we wanted to have mental health practitioners at every one of these events, but we also thought it would be valuable to have people who might not be trained as mental health practitioners, but who could be allies and people to listen and hold space for the different feelings that were coming up** *(Original interview, Anya, 26 May 2022).*

The panel members who participated in the community events organized by the PRAY AWAY team typically included: (1) those directly impacted (at least one survivor or someone who is in close relationship with a survivor), (2) a mental health practitioner (a therapist, psychologist or counselor), and (3) a leader from an advocacy organization or legislative organization; (4) an affirming clergy person either on the panel or introducing or opening the evening; (5) a moderator with deep issue expertise, with a skill in connecting with the panelists and building their trust, who will work with them in the lead up to the panel for the most impactful conversation (in the case of the PRAY AWAY campaign, their impact producer played this role); (6) and, finally but perhaps most importantly, a care team whose members are in the room (and outside the room) and are there to provide resources and support to anyone in the room who might need it.

The inclusion of care team members was something the impact team decided was crucial to ensuring that they were creating a space that was inclusive and responsive to the experiences and trauma that the film centered and that many people in the room had experienced previously.

**In addition to having a mental health practitioner on the panel, there’s also a care team of lay-people who are sometimes affiliated with the church that might be hosting us, or [they might be] social workers or community members. They were there during the screening if people needed to take a break from the screening and have someone to talk to. Attendees could walk out and know that there was somebody there who they could talk to at anytime. These individuals might not have been given extensive training, but they are given guidance around holding space for a person and being able to connect them to other resources. And I think that that alone, just having people there with that intention in that space, seemed to have been really meaningful for attendees** *(Original interview, Anya, 20 Feb 2023).*

The events also included tables run by partner organizations with resources for queer communities and organizations with resources around mental health resources and support, along with information about any of the participating advocacy organizations.

## Take a hyper-local approach that considers the unique contexts in which individuals will experience the film

Further, the events were designed to be “hyper-localized” in order to ensure that they reflected and built upon the issues, experiences, conversations, and work already taking place in that community. This typically meant including some sort of religious organization, community-based organization, or other partner working at the intersection of these issues on a local level.

When *Netflix* became the film’s main distributor, the film team knew that the documentary could reach a lot of people. This compelled the film and impact team to think early-on about the wide range of spaces and settings (far beyond the typical community screening) where people might be watching the documentary – not simply at their hosted screenings, but in their own homes. This important consideration was central to the team’s emphasis and preparatory work in also creating resources for those who saw or engaged with the film at home.

When Netflix came on and bought the film, Director Kristine Stolakis recognized that the team would need to recalibrate around the fact that the majority of people seeing the film wouldn’t be seeing it in community in a theater, and suggested that the team create a screening guide that would be available to the millions of people who were going to see the film on their own, sometimes in vulnerable situations, where they might be currently in households where their family members are trying to push them into – or where they already were in -- conversion therapy, or having come through the experience, but living with the ongoing impact in their lives. A film like this that can bring up so much personally for folks who have lived it, we felt we owed it to our audience to demonstrate that we understood that, and that we wanted to support them best we could after taking in the film alone. So, we wanted to make sure that there are resources that could support them if they just saw the film on their own (*Original interview, Anya, 26 May 2022*).

As part of its early conversations and negotiations with Netflix, the PRAY AWAY team worked to create robust trauma-informed messages and guides that would also help to build safe spaces and engagements around the film – whether it was online or in viewer homes. This included providing an “in depth set of talking points and messaging and sensitivities in documents that we prepared with Netflix.” When the company requested a “Cultural Glossary” for its team of global linguists to translate the film into 37 languages for its global audiences, Myles Markham, who had transitioned to becoming the Impact Producer for the team, went above and beyond in creating a robust guide that could land in the different cultural contexts where the film would be viewed around the world. (Original interview, Anya, 26 May 2022). Put simply, the impact team wanted to make sure that trauma sensitivities and wellness messages wouldn’t lose their meaning in translation.

**Netflix translates the film into all of the languages that are on their platform. Not every film is released on every one of their platforms globally, but this one was, and we worked really closely with them on this. Myles Markham also built a really in-depth cultural glossary that also helped their linguists understand the specific nuances and sensitivities... And then, in addition to our film, [we worked with Netflix in] directing people to our resources. We also directed people to a Netflix website that had global resources, and is specific to the local region where it had been translated (Original interview, Anya, 26 May 2022).**



## Introduction

**i** Reparative or “conversion” therapy is the attempt to change a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity by a religious leader, licensed counselor, or in peer support groups. **All major medical and mental health associations have denounced the practice as harmful.**

PRAY AWAY was created with the goal of supporting the acceptance, safety, and wellbeing of LGBTQ people. The film is a clear-sighted examination of the motivations that drive efforts to change sexual orientation or gender identity, deepening audience understanding of the harms of “conversion therapy.” PRAY AWAY also offers a forum for discussing these difficult topics and propelling community conversations toward action. For some communities this might look like engaging in advocacy or launching a public education campaign. For others it could be setting up a local support group or creating a network of LGBTQ services. However you see fit to use this guide, our hope is that it complements any work to help secure the full affirmation of LGBTQ people in your community.

### Is Conversion Therapy Still Happening?

Nearly 700,000 people in the US alone have gone through a form of conversion therapy.<sup>1</sup> Research published in July 2020 demonstrated that LGBTQ youth who underwent conversion therapy were more than twice as likely to report having attempted suicide and more than 2.5 times as likely to report multiple suicide attempts in the past year.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, alongside its correlation with high rates of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and social withdrawal, the American Psychological Association, American Psychiatric Association, and virtually every other professional health organization have publicly opposed these practices.<sup>3</sup>

*Despite these statements and the disavowal of any of the more prominent conversion therapy practices, the practice continues to exist in some form.*



## Prioritizing Mental Health:

A Viewer's Guide for Watching PRAY AWAY

Be aware of some of the difficult themes that are explored throughout the film including but not limited to homophobia, transphobia, religious trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicide ideation.

Consider watching the film with someone else who can support you throughout and after viewing the film. Talking with someone about an issue as it appears in the film can help to ease anxiety or discomfort.

If there are scenes that feel too difficult to watch, it's ok to skip them, to hit pause when you need to, or to break up your viewing into different sessions.

For some people, watching this film may produce physiological reactions. These can include rapid heart rate, shallow breathing, dry mouth, sweating, tightened muscles, or jaw locking. If you experience any of these responses and need help relaxing your body, try some grounding techniques.

Grounding techniques are movements that help you stay in the present moment and reestablish safety. You can find more information about grounding here.



This same consideration – of recognizing the many forums and ways that documentaries are used – prompted the impact team to also consider the facilitators who might be hosting independent screenings of the film in their own communities. The impact team wanted to make sure that anyone who would be hosting a screening would also at least have some fundamental resources and guides to help ensure that the film wouldn't cause more harm or be a retraumatizing experience.

**We also thought about what are the resources needed to create safe community screenings and how could we support facilitators to be thinking about what a care environment would be for having a screening on more of a community level?** *(Original interview, Anya, 26 May 2022).*

Similarly, the film team also spent considerable time considering ways that the film would be received and engaged with through social media platforms. And it became of vital importance that one of the film and impact team members was both a conversation therapy survivor and a social media strategist who had experience doing social media for some large evangelical churches and was knowledgeable about the internal workings of their world.

One of the key events that the team organized was a series of IG live events with members of the film and impact team, alongside survivor participants from the film, as well as others who helped to shape conversations around the film from their perspective as survivors of the movement. The IG live events also served as resource sharing events where the team could share legal resources and mental health resources created by partner organizations (like the NCLR's Born Perfect Campaign and the Trevor Project), alongside the discussion and mental health guides created by the film team.





Ensure that panels and community events are responsive to the needs of the survivor participants (i.e. a participant might be willing to participate in a Q&A but they might not want the burden of needing to stay for further audience/community interaction afterward as this isn't always helpful for participants).

For the impact team that worked on PRAY AWAY, it was important to center the fact that the community at the heart of their film had been exploited and should not be used for the benefit of solely educating external audiences on their experiences. Instead, community events should be as much about creating spaces for the community reflected in the film to heal as they were about any external impact goal or audience.

Tactically, this meant working to understand when survivor participants wanted a space for engagement, and when they didn't. For instance, when it came time to prepare for Q/A events, they learned that it was important to check-in with participants to see if they were interested and/or able to interact with communities after Q/A sessions. After such events, other community members will often share stories of trauma with the participants of panels or films and there can be little awareness by event planners of the toll that this can take on the participants holding and listening to such stories.

**Even when people are intending to be positive or supportive, being on the receiving end of very intimate stories of trauma has its own cost.**  
*(Original interview, Anya, 26 May 2022)*

As part of their approach to wellness and creating safe spaces for engagement, the film and impact team engaged the survivors who were featured in the film – and/or invited for engagement or screening events – in early conversations around how they would feel most comfortable. This included discussing what types of questions, what type of environment, and what type of conversation would feel helpful or healing.

We had conversations particularly with [one survivor featured in the film], but also with other survivors that we had for panels or for these events, on what is okay to share? 'What are the kinds of questions that could come up in Q&As that you feel comfortable talking about? What do you not feel comfortable talking about? What are the kinds of questions that we as a film team are going to answer or take on, so that this isn't your responsibility to take on?' We were conscientious about if there was a Q&A, it's okay for participants to not be there afterwards for people to come up to them and unload on them *(Original interview, Anya, 26 May 2022)*.

Further, the impact and film team made an effort to only engage survivors who had previous experience speaking publicly about their experience, and they also sought their guidance on whether certain allies they knew would also be well-positioned to participate.

Any of the survivors that we bring on to our panels, it's important that they're already playing roles of publicly speaking about [the issues of the film], where they've already decided that's okay for them. And in some cases, thinking about where you have a colleague, or a mother, or a parent, or a close friend who can talk to some of those experiences when it's not as deeply traumatizing for them. So, every time we have a survivor on a panel, we're very conscientious about who that survivor is, what kind of support system they already have, what's their level of awareness or comfort and experience with already fielding that and being public around their story? And what of their story are they comfortable sharing? This was something our partners at the Trevor Project, and especially Vice President of Advocacy & Government, Sam Brinton, recommended early on *(Original interview, Anya, 26 May 2022)*.

## Bring media organizations into early conversations around how their coverage could be contributing to misunderstanding and harm on the topic

As part of its engagement efforts, the PRAY AWAY team also engaged media organizations, along with *Media Matters*, a media watchdog organization, in conversation around how the news media has also contributed to a significantly limited understanding of the movement.

Anya said that the way the media has primarily covered the issue of conversion therapy is as a fringe issue, without providing a fuller picture of its prevalence and the power structures that are maintaining it.

**Predominantly the way that conversion therapy is covered [by the media] is as this fringe thing, it's like this crazy out-there thing, like electroshock therapy, which exists in the most extreme forms. But we wanted to show the fact that, actually, it's just as harmful when it's in counseling and Bible studies and when the wallpaper of your community is continually telling you that there's something wrong and broken with you. All of those different ways contribute to people internalizing these messages and leading to high rates of self-harm. So, when the media talks about electroshock therapy, for instance, if a lot of churches say they don't do conversion therapy, because they're identifying it with that kind of practice. They're like, 'No, we are just giving people choices around their lives and we're showing them there's another way.'** *(Original interview, Anya, 26 May 2022).*

In other words, it was important to the film and impact team to directly address the limited understanding of the issue among journalists, since prevailing media coverage had been giving religious organizations that are practicing conversion therapy too many ways-out and they were thereby supporting a limited level of public understanding of the scale, scope and urgency of the issue. As a result, preparing for press engagements and thinking about how their coverage can either help or harm the people at the center of their film also became a central wellness consideration for the film team.

**And so that informed both some of the key frames in the film itself, but also around how we wanted to talk about the film in the press. Because even if people didn't see the film, reviews and press about the film can carry the messages of the film itself. And so we really wanted to focus on this orientation around thinking about power, around thinking about the pervasiveness, around thinking about the fact that this is really present and to raise the register of this being an urgent and extremely harmful issue** *(Original interview, Anya, 26 May 2022).*

## Screening and engagement events provide a unique opportunity to bring disparate groups together and create spaces for follow-up partnerships

One of the most exemplary outcomes of the impact work done around the film PRAY AWAY involved team members ability to use the impact screenings to bring together several different groups that may not have worked together before but which all had intersecting interests and communities, and whose ability to end conversion therapy and support survivors who are directly impacted could be strengthened by approaching the issue collectively.

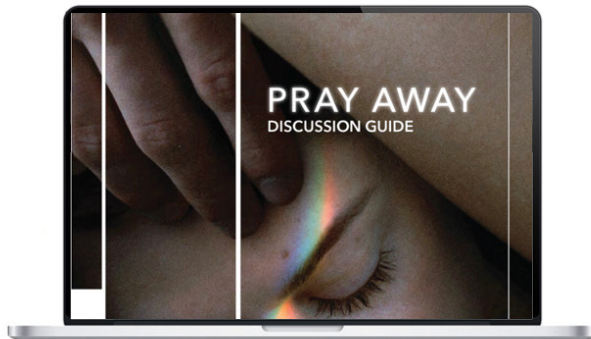
**Consistently after the events, the partners talk about the fact that new deep connections have been made and how rich the conversation was and how, even if this was the conversation that's dealing with some pretty significant mental health issues and pretty significant issues around oppression, gay and trans-oppression, it's also that they're energized by the conversation, that there's a lot of value to them and that they want to stay connected to each other and build on that together** *(Original interview, Anya, 20 Feb 2023).*

At the same time, Anya pointed out that many of these organizations were strangers to one another before the screening. And so the act of planning the engagement events required considerable advanced time, care and energy; it involved building a coalition of partners, balancing schedules and forming new relationships all before partners even entered the room for a screening event. But this work is vital and part of the value of strategically planning documentary-centered engagement events in advance with the goals and wellness considerations of your community at the core.

**Every organization [that participates in a screening event] is chosen, it's based on research and relationships and being informed by people, local community, and people who are also really tapped into these worlds. But it's also meant to foster those relationships for them. And it seems like people do feel that something special happens [at these events]. I think because of all of that, it also results in a bigger impact of the event itself, as opposed to just people who come to a panel where it's a room of strangers, and you come as a room of strangers and you leave as a room of strangers, because it should be much more than that** *(Original interview, Anya, 20 Feb 2023).*



# KEY RESOURCES



Pray Away Discussion Guide



Prioritizing Mental Health: A Viewer's Guide to Watching *Pray Away*

**PRAY AWAY RESOURCES:** [prayawayfilm.com/resources](http://prayawayfilm.com/resources)

## About this Case Study Report

This report is based on interviews and generous contributions, revisions, and reviews from:

**Anya Rous, Shae Washington, Myles Markham, Kristine Stolakis, and other members of the *Pray Away* team**

Case Study Research Team:

**Caty Borum, David Conrad-Pérez and Aras Coskuntuncel**

CMSI Operations and Publication Director:

**Varsha Ramani**

Copy Editing Support:

**Kimberly Reason**

Leadership/Advisory Working Group:

**Megha Agrawal Sood, Vanessa Cuervo Forero, Sarah Mosses, Asad Muhammad, Simone Pero, Denae Peters, Tracy Rector, Marcia Smith, Emily Wanja**

Case Study Design:

**Orange Static**

Funding Support Provided by:

**Perspective Fund**

