

# The American Nurse

## Theatrical Discussion Guide

INSIDE THE NATION'S MOST TRUSTED PROFESSION



A CAROLYN JONES DOCUMENTARY

# THE AMERICAN NURSE

HEALING AMERICA

IN THEATERS MAY 8

CAROLYN JONES PRODUCTIONS with LISA FRANK PRESENTS A DIGINEXT FILMS "THE AMERICAN NURSE"  
DIRECTED BY CAROLYN JONES PRODUCED BY LISA FRANK EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS JAKA VINSSEK AND ISABEL SAGURNI EDITOR STEVE HEFTNER EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS HAYES GREENFIELD EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS CANDACE THOMPSON EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS CHRIS RAMEY AND DAN TIMMONS  
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# About this Discussion Guide

There are 3.2 million registered nurses currently working in the U.S. That's 1 out of every 100 Americans.

But the U.S. population is growing, aging and getting less healthy all the time. We will need to educate at least 1 million new nurses by 2020 to meet the growing demand. And we especially need more nurses like Naomi, Jason, Tonia, Brian and Sister Stephen—the nurses featured in *The American Nurse*.

In early 2012, photographer/director Carolyn Jones and her team began a journey across the United States, recording the unique experiences of nurses at work. The project began with a photography book, and was followed by this feature documentary film. The photographs and narratives aim to inspire the public to think about nurses in a way that they may never have before, with a newfound appreciation for this indispensable figure on the front lines of health and healthcare today: the American nurse.

The goal of this discussion guide is to use *The American Nurse* film as a springboard to inspire audiences to learn more about the nursing profession and to get involved by helping to raise the voice of nurses across the country. We believe that nurses have a wealth of untapped wisdom about our health and healthcare, and that with their help we can get one step closer to *healing America*.

# About the Film

THE AMERICAN NURSE explores some of the biggest issues facing America - aging, war, poverty, prisons - through the work and lives of five nurses. It is an examination of real people that will change how we think about nurses and how we wrestle with the challenges of healing America.

Jason Short drives up a creek to reach a home-bound cancer patient in Appalachia. Tonia Faust runs a prison hospice program where inmates serving life sentences care for their fellow inmates as they're dying. Naomi Cross coaches patient Becky, an ovarian cancer survivor, through the Caesarean delivery of her son. Sister Stephen runs a nursing home where she uses goats, sheep, dogs and llamas for animal therapy and the entire nursing staff comes together to sing to a dying resident. And Brian McMillion, an Army veteran and former medic, rehabilitates wounded soldiers returning from war.



## How to use *The American Nurse*

There are many ways that you can use THE AMERICAN NURSE film to start a dialogue in your community about nursing, health and healthcare. You can use this film as:

- **A tool to inspire** - we hope that audiences from all backgrounds will find this film helpful, whether you're a student in search of a career path, or someone simply looking for a pathway to more purpose in your life
- **A recruitment tool** - we need more nurses! Use this film to recruit more aspiring nurses into the field, to show practicing nurses models of alternate jobs within the field, and to help with nurse retention and preventing burnout
- **An education tool** - for nursing school students, high school students or practicing nurses and other health professionals who can receive continuing education credits for watching the film
- **A public awareness tool** - to help the public better understand the nursing profession and how indispensable nurses are to our health and healthcare
- **A training tool** - for nurses, doctors, medical assistants and caregivers of all types
- **An advocacy tool** - to inform policymakers and healthcare decision makers about the scope of nursing practice and to encourage them to invite nurses to the table for key policy discussions





## Director's Statement

I had a great nurse who got me through chemotherapy. I had breast cancer, and when I was going through that crummy experience, I arrived at a point where I didn't have one single hair on my body. I just didn't feel like *me* anymore. Losing my eyebrows and eyelashes was the last straw. The only place I felt normal was with the nurse giving me chemotherapy. Something happens when you look really sick - people treat you differently. But not Joanne. She was funny and irreverent. She talked about hair color and boyfriends and dinner dates. She got me through it.

I've always been fascinated by people who know what to do in really difficult situations.

When I started to dig into the world of nurses for *The American Nurse Project*, I recognized a few things right away. Nurses are different. They see the human being first. They are trained, conditioned, born to find the avenue into understanding others so that they can do their work. That work is to heal and make someone feel better - no matter who they are, what their ethnic background is, what political party they belong to, what crime they have committed. This gives them a special set of tools. They are full of tolerance and understanding, compassion and love. And it's beautiful.

I've now met and interviewed 110 of some of the best nurses in this country. Nurses dealing with issues that affect us all: poverty, war, end of life, a health care system that is more of a disease management system, drug abuse, family abuse, life and death. Nurses understand humanity in a way that no one else does.

Diving into the world of nurses has made my life brighter. I got a glimpse of the world through their eyes and it actually changed the way I think about things. I thought I knew how I felt about war, religion, coal mining, end of life. This journey into the world of nurses has been hugely transformative for me, kind of like having someone take me by my ankles and shake me upside down to change my perspective and show me how much I don't know. And that's a lot.

I hope this film takes the viewer on that path, through the lens of a nurse, and opens a door to understanding not only those around us, but ourselves, and what wonders we are capable of.

Carolyn Jones  
April 26, 2014  
New York City





# Discussion Questions - Getting Started

- Have you ever had a personal experience with a great nurse, either as a patient or a family member of a patient? If so, how did that nurse help you or your family member?
- What is the general public's perception of nursing and what nurses do? Why is it important that we change that perception?
- Are nurses a unique breed of people— are they “saints”— or do we all have some of their qualities? What are the key “ingredients” that go into making a great nurse? Do many nurses start showing these qualities at a young age, or are they developed over time?
- What are some of the issues that nurses are dealing with in *your* local community?
- What can non-nurses and the general public learn from nurses about the healthcare system and our health as individuals and communities?
- Why do you think that these 5 nurses were selected out of the 100+ nurses that we met across the country for the American Nurse Project? And why do you think we chose the specific locations/regions?





## Key Themes



- **COMMUNITY** - in the film, we see that community is a vital part of a nurse's work. Jason Short is able to connect with his patients because he's a member of their community, so there is a built-in trust.  
*Discuss the importance of community and cultural understanding in nursing.*
- **NON-JUDGMENT** - the nurses in the film are able to treat all of their patients with equal kindness, skill and without judgment. Tonia Faust talks about what it's like to deal with inmates who have committed "horrific crimes" and yet she is "not here to judge them.... just to take care of them."  
*Discuss the importance of being non-judgmental in nursing.*
- **ELDER CARE** - how do we typically care for our elderly in this country? Could we do better? Is Sister Stephen's nursing home unique, or could her model be replicated elsewhere?  
*Discuss the current state and the future of elder care in this country.*
- **CAREER PATHS** - the 5 nurses in the film all followed unique paths to nursing. Many nurses feel the "calling" from an early age, and others enter the profession as second or third careers. Nursing is such a versatile profession that each nurse has an opportunity to find their niche, based on their personal interests and passions.  
*For nurses: discuss how you got into nursing. For non-nurses: discuss the importance of following a passion in one's career.*
- **MILITARY & VETERANS** - Brian McMillion's mission is to make sure that no single veteran is allowed to slip through the cracks. Our healthcare system for veterans is in a state of crisis at the moment.  
*Discuss healthcare in the military and what we can do to improve healthcare for veterans in this country.*



- FAITH - many of the nurses that we met in the American Nurse Project have a strong sense of religion or spirituality.  
*Discuss the role of religion in nursing and how nurses decide when they should or shouldn't introduce religion into conversations with patients and families.*
- END-OF-LIFE - many of the nurses in the film are helping patients at the end of their lives. Patients and families often rely on nurses for guidance through this very difficult time, and there are many decisions to be made, often without the guidance of the patient themselves.  
*Discuss the challenging decisions that patients and families are forced to make regarding their end-of-life care, and what steps can be taken to make the process easier, more humane and more compassionate.*
- POVERTY - Jason Short works with patients in one of the poorest regions of the country who are dealing with health problems made worse by their lack of access to resources, hospitals and supplies.  
*Discuss the importance of nurses in caring for the world's "invisible people" including those with few resources and little access to care.*
- PRISON - Tonia Faust cares for inmates in the largest maximum-security prison in the United States. Prison inmates have a constitutional right to receive adequate health care.  
*What do you think about providing healthcare to prison inmates? Should they have access to the same level of healthcare as the general public?*
- JOB FULFILLMENT - Each of the 5 nurses profiled in the film seems to have found the perfect niche within the profession that reflects their unique passions, talents and values.  
*Do you feel fulfilled in the work that you do? Do you think that nursing offers a higher level of meaning and job satisfaction than other professions?*







# Character Exploration



## NAOMI CROSS the Johns Hopkins Hospital

- Many scenes in the film show nurses working autonomously, but the birth scene shows nurse Naomi as part of a very skilled and highly integrated team of health professionals. ***How important is teamwork in nursing?***

- As the Labor and Delivery nurse on the team,

Naomi is the person who spends the most time with patient Becky before, after and during her delivery. ***How important is it for the patient to have that kind of continuity?***

- There is a lot of debate right now about Caesarean delivery. We chose to show this complex delivery in the film because we thought that it was a great story. The patient had had ovarian cancer, and the doctors needed to check for any signs of recurrence after the baby was delivered, which prevented them from placing the baby “skin-to-skin” with his mom immediately after birth. But in many cases, people argue that Caesareans are performed too often. ***Where do you stand on this debate? How can nurses best advocate for their patients and guide them to making the best decisions?***
- Naomi shares an incredibly personal and intimate story about her own experience with loss. ***When is it appropriate for a nurse to use her personal experience to help a patient get through a difficult time? Is it healthy to share your own painful stories with others?***
- Naomi told us that in the past there weren’t many resources to help mothers and families dealing with perinatal bereavement, or the loss of a baby, but she is helping to raise awareness about the issue. ***What are some of the best ways for nurses to help patients get through the emotional trauma of losing a loved one?***
- Naomi talks about how important it is to have a supportive family to help her through the tough times at work, and we see how involved her husband Jason is in her life. He says that very often nurses “can’t go to their friends to discuss their day.” ***Where can they go? Do you rely on your family and friends for support through tough times at work? What are some other coping mechanisms that you use? How important is self-care?***
- In Naomi’s final scene, we meet her son Nathan, who describes the respect and admiration he feels for his mom who “save lives and helps to create new ones.” ***How much do your own children or other family members know about what you do in your profession?***
- As we watch Naomi gently preparing newborn Felix for his first baby bath, she says that “this is the best part of my day.” ***What are some of the joys of your profession that make all of the tough times worthwhile?***



## JASON SHORT Appalachian Home Health

- Jason talks about his path to nursing and his original dismissal of the profession because he's a man. ***What is the role of men in nursing and how is it evolving?***

- Jason works with patients in their homes in rural Appalachia, many of whom have no

other access to care. We watch as he drives up a flooded creek to get to a patient's home, in an area that "even an ambulance can't get to." ***Is it true that the future of healthcare is in the home?***

- Statistics show that the majority of Americans would prefer to die at home surrounded by loved ones. ***Discuss how hospice care in the home can be beneficial for patients and families.***
- In the film, we see Jason working closely not only with patients, but also the patients' family members, often training them in basic caregiving procedures. ***Discuss the important role of family members in providing care for a loved one.***
- While Naomi was seen working as a critical part of a team in the operating room, we see Jason primarily working independently as he visits his patients. ***How important is autonomy in nursing and advanced practice nursing?***
- In Jason's first scene, he is seen stepping outside with his patient's wife to discuss the patient's prognosis. In Jason's culture, it is considered appropriate to speak privately with a family member, out of earshot from the patient himself. ***Would that be appropriate in all contexts? Is this a matter of cultural awareness and understanding, or do you think the patient should be privy to everything that's being discussed?***
- Jason talks about his personal experience with a serious motorcycle accident that left him in a wheelchair for almost a year, saying that "I found out what it was like to need care." He also tells the story of his father's death, and how that experience "made me want to get into the home" with patients. ***How do you think that a personal experience as a patient or family member of a patient would impact a nurse's work?***
- Jason says that he could relate to what he was learning in nursing school because of his experience as an auto mechanic, comparing the water pump in a car to a person's heart. ***Did you have tools to help you conceptualize ideas in school?***
- Jason works with patients in an area characterized by extreme poverty, where a sign that reads "End State Maintenance" indicates the extent of their isolation. The extreme poverty is often accompanied by unhealthy habits and lack of education, and yet he is able to treat all of his patients equally and without judgment. ***Discuss the importance of being non-judgmental and professional in nursing, under any and all circumstances.***



## TONIA FAUST Louisiana State Penitentiary

•The Louisiana State Penitentiary, also known as “Angola Prison” is the largest maximum security prison in the U.S. ***Discuss whether you’ve ever thought about who might be caring for inmates in the prison system, and what happens to the inmates at the end of their lives?***

- Tonia says that a lot of people ask her how she can take care of inmates who have committed “such horrific crimes” and she replies that “They’re here doing their time. I’m not here to judge them, I’m just here to take care of them.” ***Discuss what it means to be non-judgmental as a nurse, particularly when dealing with a patient population like prison inmates.***
- At the end of the film we see Tonia walking through the prison graveyard, where she sees the gravestone of her first hospice patient, George English. 60% of inmates that die at Angola are buried there, since they don’t have family members with the means to bury them elsewhere. ***What do you think it’s like to get attached to your patients and then to see them die?***
- Prison inmates are constitutionally guaranteed the right to healthcare. ***Is that controversial? How much medical and health care do you think needs to be provided to them?***
- In the film, we meet an inmate in hospice who says that his relationship with his daughter is the most important thing to him now. ***At the end of our lives, are there universal things that we all want, no matter where we are?***
- When our film crew first met Lafayette Ballard, the inmate caregiver in the film, we thought that he embodied the spirit of nursing and what it means to selflessly care for others. He says “I didn’t think I could do it, but once I started, it took a part of me.” ***Discuss the idea of redemption and the possibility to find peace and meaning through caregiving.***
- One of the most graphic scenes in the film is when Tonia and Lafayette clean the open wound on an inmate’s ankle. So much of nursing is intensely graphic and intimate, so we thought it would be important for the camera to capture that. ***As an audience member, did that moment and others feel too “real”? Do you think it’s appropriate to show this kind of thing?***
- Lafayette speaks about prison as a second chance at life, saying that “Angola saved me... I played with death.” We watch Lafayette as he helps a wheelchair-bound inmate take a shower—an act that in many ways helps to heal Lafayette as much as it helps the patient. ***Does Lafayette’s story affect the way you think about maximum-security prison inmates and the possibility for rehabilitation?***
- At the end of the film, Tonia says “there’s a purpose for me here.” ***How important is it to find purpose and meaning in one’s life and work? Do you think that nursing as a profession offers more opportunity to find purpose than other professions?***





## BRIAN MCMILLION V.A. San Diego Health System

• The story of how Brian entered the military is an interesting reflection on why we make the choices that we do in life. ***Discuss how you made the choices that you did in your own career path, and what the stepping stones were along the way.***

- Brian remembers the “first person I saw die” while he was stationed in Panama. ***Do you think that every nurse remembers the first death of a patient that they cared for?***
- Brian’s patients don’t typically start out as “sick” the way we might think of a patient in the ICU— often they are young and healthy prior to their injuries in war. Often these young soldiers “think they’re invincible” so they aren’t prepared for what lies ahead after they get injured. ***Discuss the unique challenges for nurses working with veterans and in the military.***
- 20% of the male homeless population in the U.S. are veterans. Brian works with veterans at San Diego’s Stand Down in an effort to provide them with necessary services and keep them off the streets. ***Discuss the role of nursing in helping the most vulnerable populations, including the homeless.***
- Brian talks about the veteran community as “my family” and his patient Wally refers to Brian as “brother.” ***Discuss how important it is for patients to be able to relate to their nurse, and whether that’s easier when the nurse shares their community or background.***
- We initially met Brian because we wanted to visit the place that had the most veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, and that was in San Diego. ***Discuss whether you’ve ever thought about who the people are that fight our wars, and who cares for them. Does Brian’s story and those of his patients affect the way you view the military?***
- Brian reflects on his own personal challenges in maintaining relationships through the course of his career, which has required him to travel extensively and be away from home for long periods of time. ***Does nursing as a profession have unique challenges and require sacrifices that impact personal relationships?***
- In working with his veteran patients, Brian says that he has to “strike a balance between honoring what they *were* and giving them what they deserve now.” This seems to be a skill shared by all great nurses— the ability to remember that even though a patient might be sick today, underneath the illness is a human being who wasn’t always in need of care. ***How are nurses and other caregivers able to remember this vital lesson? How can the rest of us incorporate it into our lives in order to treat people with greater empathy?***
- At the end of the film, Brian says that no matter what he does, he’ll do it with a nursing background. ***Once you’re a nurse, are you always a nurse? Do the skills you learn as a nurse stay with you for life?***





## SISTER STEPHEN Villa Loretto Nursing Home

• Sister Stephen talks about her “calling” in joining the religious life. ***Discuss the intersection of faith and nursing, and how religion might play a role in a nurse’s commitment to helping people.***

• Villa Loretto is a unique example of the use of animal therapy— complete with llamas,

goats and sheep— but many facilities can bring dogs and cats in to spend time with patients.

***How beneficial is animal therapy to patients, especially those dealing with dementia? Do you think that it’s ok to bring animals inside a nursing home?***

- Sister Stephen has started a very successful respite program that introduces children with behavioral problems to older people living in a long-term care facility. ***Why do you think spending time with animals and the elderly helps these kids learn to control their behaviors?***
- Sister Stephen tells a heart-wrenching story of her father’s battle with Alzheimer’s and her ultimate and painful decision to stop aggressive treatment and allow him to die peacefully at the end of his life. When it came to her own father, she needed the guidance and support of a nurse colleague and friend. ***How hard is it for patients and families to choose hospice and palliative care over other interventions?***
- Sister Stephen says that often the patient who is dying is no longer able to communicate or make their own end of life decisions, so those decisions are left to family members, many of whom have never discussed these questions before. ***Why do we as a culture avoid conversations about death and dying? How can we encourage ourselves and others to initiate those dialogues sooner in life? Have you talked to your own family about what you would want at the end of your life?***
- After the scene in which the nurses sing to a dying resident, Sister Stephen bends over and whispers to her “If Jesus is calling you, you go. You go right home to Jesus.” ***Is it a nurse’s role to give a patient “permission” to die?***
- In many countries and cultures around the world, families live in multi-generational households and the elderly are revered for their wisdom and experience. ***Why do Americans tend to send our elders to nursing homes at the end of life, and is it a good thing?***
- Sister Stephen compares her facility to the local farms in rural Wisconsin, which are all getting bought out by larger “mega-farms.” ***Discuss the challenges in running an independent healthcare facility like Villa Loretto and the business of healthcare.***
- At the end of the film, Sister Stephen says that “when we are generous to God, he will give back in measure pressed down and overflowing.” ***Do you feel that you get back more than you give in your work? Do you think that many nurses feel that way?***



# Resources

The American Nurses Foundation - Scholarship Fund

[www.anfonline.org/scholarships](http://www.anfonline.org/scholarships)

Nurse.com - CE Credits

[nurse.com/americanursemovie](http://nurse.com/americanursemovie)

Villa Loretto Nursing Home

[www.villalorettonh.org/](http://www.villalorettonh.org/)

The Conversation Project

[theconversationproject.org/](http://theconversationproject.org/)

Angola Rodeo at Louisiana State Penitentiary

[www.angolarodeo.com/](http://www.angolarodeo.com/)

The Johns Hopkins Hospital

[www.hopkinsmedicine.org/the\\_johns\\_hopkins\\_hospital](http://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/the_johns_hopkins_hospital)

Chesapeake Life Center

[www.chesapeakelifecenter.org/](http://www.chesapeakelifecenter.org/)

Appalachian Hospice Care

[www.appalachianhospicecare.com/](http://www.appalachianhospicecare.com/)

Stand Down San Diego

[www.vvsd.net/standdown.htm](http://www.vvsd.net/standdown.htm)

*"elegantly clear-eyed...a worthwhile documentary. Tears are almost inevitable."  
-The New York Times, Anita Gates*



CAROLYN JONES PRODUCTIONS AND LISA FRANK PRESENT IN ASSOCIATION WITH DIGINEXT FILMS "THE AMERICAN NURSE"  
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER CAROLYN JONES PRODUCED BY LISA FRANK DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY JAKA VINSEK EDITED BY ISABEL SADURNI AND STEVE HEFFNER ORIGINAL MUSIC BY HAYES GREENFIELD ASSOCIATE PRODUCER CANDACE THOMPSON COLORIST CHRIS RAMEY SOUND EDITOR DAN TIMMONS  
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For more information on the book, the film and the interviews:  
[www.AmericanNurseProject.com](http://www.AmericanNurseProject.com)

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