Movie Discussion Guide

North Country

"All she wanted was to make a living. Instead she made history."



© Warner Bros.

When Josey Aimes returns to her hometown in Northern Minnesota she needs a good job. A single mother with two kids she turns to the predominant source of employment in the region - the iron mines. The mines provide a livelihood that has sustained a community for generations. It is an industry long dominated by men, in a place unaccustomed to change. She is prepared for back-breaking and often dangerous work, but coping with the harassment she and the other female miners encounter from their male co-workers proves far more challenging. NORTH COUNTRY is a fictionalized account of the first class-action sexual harassment case in the United States -- Jenson vs. Eveleth Mines, where a woman who endured a range of abuse while working as a miner filed and won the landmark 1984 lawsuit.

Programming Suggestions

This discussion guide is designed to facilitate educational programs after viewing the film NORTH COUNTRY. Its purpose is to generate discussion based on social issues found within the movie and for program participants to reflect on themes that may be pertinent to them. Therefore, there are no "right" or "wrong" answers to questions in this guide.

The discussion facilitator may choose to utilize one of the following activities as a means of developing discussion:

- Invite a speaker on the history of sexual harassment law or a university official to discuss ways to end sexual harassment and procedures to report sexual harassment on your campus. Ask a representative from your Women's Studies department to discuss gender differences in the workplace.
- The main character in the film, Josey, is sexually assaulted as a teenager. Invite a campus professional and/or peer support group to talk about the effects of assault and methods of coping for survivors.
- Domestic violence is a theme in the film; invite a speaker to talk about the immediate effects on a family as well as the long term effects on children.
- The events in North Country take place just over 20 years ago. Lead the group in a discussion of how our culture has and has not changed during those 20 years - both in general and in relation to sexual harassment.

An important consideration in choosing any facilitation option is that all students have an opportunity to participate. Be aware that many of the topics addressed in the film are not often talked about in public settings. Students who attend the program may have varying degrees of comfort level with the discussion.

Discussion Questions:

- One of the recurring themes in the film is “starting over”. In what ways is coming to college like starting over?
- Early in the film we see that Josey was beaten up by her husband and subsequently left him. What do you imagine are some of the issues she had to weigh in making that decision?
- Upon arriving at her parent's house, Josey's father asks, “Did he catch you with another man? Is that why he laid hands on you?” What was your reaction? Why do you think he might ask such a question?
- In the next scene we are taken to the later hearing. The mines lawyer asks Josey, “It wasn't the first time you disappointed your father was it?” She responds, “It wasn't the first time that he disappointed me either.” Discuss ways that all families disappoint each other and how they can work through those events.
- Josey's mother says to her, “Everyone needs a purpose, yours is your kids, and your father's is the mine.” What messages did your family give you about being a man or about being a woman and your resulting purpose in life?
- There are several scenes in which tacit excuses are offered for domestic abuse. For example:
  “Probably on a bender when he did it. So you take him out the shed and give him a talking to. Heck, my wife left me a dozen times before we worked out the kinks”
  “He is your husband you know. A man needs a job, a purpose.”
- Respond. Can there be an excuse? Why might one be offered?
- When Josey decides to apply for a job at the mine she begins to get even more criticism. For example:
  “You want to be a lesbian now?” from her father
  “She's kind of girly to be a miner.” from Glory's husband
- Why do you think that a woman working in what is traditionally a man's field was such an issue?
- How do our gender roles translate to our work lives? What are the messages you got in your family and community on the subject as you were growing up?
- The mining company did a pregnancy test before hiring her. Is that legal? Can you decline? What does the law say about pregnancy as a medical condition now?
- Almost immediately Josey and the other women are subjected to ridicule and inappropriate commentary. For example:
  “The doc says that you look darn good under those clothes.”
  “One of these girls is going to be my bitch - a nice body, no fatties.”
  “You're taking jobs where there aren't any to take. You don't belong here and you know it.
- Take it like a man and do the work. How might you have responded in their shoes?
- One of the movie’s themes is coming back to live in a small town and the perception/reality of everyone knowing you. Have you ever lived in a small community where this was the case? How is your campus or residence hall community the same or different?
- The women are told repeatedly that they should have better senses of humor about commentary and practical jokes. We know that humor can be an effective response - both in de-escalating a situation and as a coping mechanism. However, where do you draw the line? What do you think?
- At the trial, Josey's supervisor says, “Men will always walk the line - when they cross over it is when most gals give them a slap on the hand and get them back over on their side of the line. It's how men and women have been handling things since Adam and Eve.” Respond. What does his statement assume about women? About men?
- The union oath says, 'respect all members'. What does respect mean to you? What actions should or should not be expected/tolerated?
- When Bill is thinking about taking Josey's case to court he says, “Wait till you get to a courtroom - it's called the 'nuts and sluts defense'. Either you're nuts and you imagined it or you're a slut and you asked for it - either way is not pretty.” What do his statements assume about our legal system? Is either of those assumptions still true today?
- When Bill asserts that Josey should “just start over” she says, “I know I could find a man to take care of me - I don't want a man to take care of me, I want to take care of myself, take care of my kids.” Respond
- When Mr. Pearson is being warned by his lawyer that he might lose the case he says, “Did you think that I hired you because you were the smartest lawyer I could find? No - you were the smartest woman lawyer I could find.” What do you think of his strategy? Do you think that happens today?
- Near the end of the film Josey's father finally comes to her defense. He speaks of the difference between how women are treated at the company picnic and at work. How do you think the men had excused the difference in their behavior to themselves?
- In several scenes the Clarence Thomas Supreme Court confirmation hearings are playing in the background. How did that hearing and the sexual harassment case against him change our society? Our media coverage?

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