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Finding Justice

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Finding Justice A Documentary by Hannah Miller

Synopsis

Finding Justice tackles the devastation caused by wrongful conviction through the journey of Jeffrey Deskovic. After serving 16 years in prison for a murder he didn't commit, Deskovic has strived to rebuild his life. The film follows him as he finishes law school and runs a foundation that frees the wrongfully convicted, all while dealing with lingering trauma.

Project Overview

The National Registry of Exonerations at the University of Michigan estimates that there have been 2,432 exonerations since 1989, representing a total of 21,290 years lost to wrongful imprisonment.

Jeffrey Deskovic is one of these exonerees. At age 17, he was wrongfully convicted of raping and murdering his high school classmate. After serving 16 years in prison, he was released on the basis of DNA evidence and received a settlement of \$52 million from the state of New York and Westchester County. He used that money to start The Jeffrey Deskovic Foundation for Justice, which frees other wrongfully convicted individuals. He's helped exonerate seven so far.

Jeff's story sheds light on the devastating impact of wrongful conviction, an occurrence more common than people think due to a troubled justice system. However, it is also a tale of resilience and redemption. It asks and answers the question: how can a person overcome trauma to achieve his dreams?

Despite the injustice he's suffered, Jeff has been trying his hardest to make up for lost time. He's formed important bonds within the criminal justice community, especially with fellow exonerees.

At the age of 45, Jeff has just graduated from Pace Law School—he wants to represent the foundation's clients himself. Even though he's one of the oldest students and the only one to have earned his undergraduate degree while incarcerated, he finished on time near the top of his class. At his graduation party, he announced his intentions to eventually run for district attorney of Westchester County and establish a fairer justice system than the one that put him behind bars.

Access

I have been granted exclusive access to Jeff's story. A few local news outlets have briefly covered milestones like his graduation, but no one has followed him throughout the entirety of his final year of law school and captured his process of emotional healing. In addition to openly discussing his past thoughts of suicide on-camera, Jeff engages with fellow exonerees through unique activities, such as a therapy game designed specifically for the formerly incarcerated.

Finding Justice takes an intimate look into Jeff's professional life and personal struggles as he confronts the anxiety caused by his trauma. We hear from the people in his life who have been his champions—the law school professor who convinced Pace to accept him and his graduate school adviser, who is very proud of Jeff, but also worries deeply about him. We also hear from the individuals Jeff helped free, including one who was incarcerated with him. The result is a compelling portrait that shows how being dealt the toughest hand doesn't necessarily mean defeat.

Act One

We meet Jeffrey Deskovic, who runs The Jeffrey Deskovic Foundation for Justice, a Bronx-based organization that helps free wrongfully convicted people. We see him in his office going over cases and skyping with other legal organizations. Stacks of letters and files fill his office—they're all from incarcerated individuals who want his help.

We even hear from people he's helped exonerate at a large, joyful gathering. John Whitfield, who served 25 years in prison, says, "If it wasn't for the foundation, I would never have gotten out," in an emotional speech.

Marcus Washington, who spent 30 years in prison for a murder he didn't commit, is next to speak. He and Jeff reveal that they were incarcerated together—this is the first time we learn that Jeff is an exoneree too. "We always used to talk about our innocence," Washington says.

Act Two

The details of Jeff's wrongful conviction are revealed through archival imagery, such as a mugshot that shows that Jeff was just a baby-faced 17-year-old when he was convicted of rape and murder in 1990. The victim was Angela Correa, his high school classmate, and he was targeted by the police because he was a social outcast at school. Jeff recounts the pressure the police put him under in order to get a confession. "They kept me off balance emotionally and psychologically," he explains.

We learn from Bennett Gershman, an expert on wrongful conviction and a professor at Pace Law School, that false confessions are common among young people. "You have experienced cops who were able to overcome this young, vulnerable kid's will to resist," he says of Jeff.

Jeff explains how he was able to survive the 16 years he served in prison. His twin faiths in God and the justice system carried him through, though the latter was particularly tested—he lost all seven of his court appeals. "I was ultimately contemplating suicide—there was just no way out," Jeff says in a conversation with a shocked colleague at the foundation.

He was eventually released in 2006 on the basis of DNA evidence, but though more than a decade has passed, he is still affected by his experiences. Anila Duro, his former graduate adviser and one of his biggest champions, discusses her deep concern for him.

"With him sharing his story, there's a lot of trauma that comes," she says.

Jeff reconciles what happened to him by helping to exonerate people through his foundation.

“I can’t forget the people I’ve left behind,” he says.

But being behind-the-scenes in wrongful conviction cases is no longer enough for him. Jeff wants to represent his foundation’s clients himself. At age 45, he’s in his final year at Pace Law School, where he’s being mentored by Prof. Gershman.

“This is the perfect person to get an opportunity to study law and to go out in the world and right a wrong,” Gershman explains.

The two share a tearful embrace where Gershman expresses how proud he is of Jeff.

However, law school has not been easy for Jeff. He shares his fear of failure and how he’s had to work twice as hard as his younger classmates, all while juggling his foundation work and dealing with his trauma. We see moments of frustration—Jeff gets angry at a friend on the phone and says that he has to be constantly organized in order to keep from feeling out of control. He finally acknowledges that his trauma is something he will always carry with him.

“I don’t think that you ever fully recover 100%,” he says.

Act Three

Jeff attempts to deal with his trauma by participating in a group therapy activity at the foundation. Along with fellow exonerees, he plays RECHARGE, a game designed specifically for those who have been incarcerated.

The first question concerns the advice you’d have for someone on their first day of prison.

“Your entire identity is taken away that you had as a free person,” says Anthony Papa, an exoneree who served 12 years in prison. “No longer will you be a father, husband, part of the human race. You go into prison, and you become a statistic, you become a number.”

Jeff says he would tell them to focus on the most important goal: freedom.

The next question involves an activity: the participants have to draw to their souls. The first reveal is a sketch of a burning heart.

“When I went in, I thought I was going to die,” says Dieter Tejada, a former incarcerated. “It was all dark but at some point, there was a fire that lit up.”

Anthony DiPippo, an exoneree who served 20 years, shares a drawing of himself standing in a burning lake.

“It’s my own personal turmoil, you know my own demons and you know that represents

my anxiety, my fears, my PTSD,” DiPippo says.

Before sharing his sketch, we hear Jeff recount how RECHARGE allows him to connect with people and share his experiences in a comfortable environment. We see him finally at ease while playing the game as he laughs, smiles and joyfully interacts with others. When he shares his drawing, it also includes fire.

“My soul’s on fire with trying to accomplish,” Jeff says. “Worlds to conquer—that kind of thing.”

Jeff has indeed managed to conquer. We see the start of his graduation—law students filing in as processional music plays. The dean of the law school even recognizes Jeff in his speech to the graduates, saying that Jeff has provided an example “to all of us on the importance of resilience, perseverance and hard work.”

When Jeff is called to the stage to receive his diploma, loud applause erupts. He is hooded by Prof. Gershman and the two embrace. One he comes off-stage, he meets Anila. She presents him with a t-shirt that says, “I’m that exoneree who’s now a lawyer.”

After the ceremony, Jeff’s friends and family congregate at a restaurant for his graduation party. Though he’s in the midst of celebrating, Jeff still has his work on his mind as he discusses the foundation with his guests. He also embraces fellow exonerees invited to the party.

At the end of the night, Jeff addresses the large crowd. He admits law school was difficult, but that what got him through it was remembering those with pending wrongful conviction cases. He can’t wait to fight for their freedom. He then makes a huge announcement.

“I’m coming back to run for Westchester District Attorney,” he says as the crowd gives him a standing ovation.

The final scene shows a joyous Jeff surrounded by those who love him.

Text cards at the end of the film reveal that Jeff passed the bar exam on his first try and that he’s preparing for his first wrongful conviction case as a practicing lawyer.

Style

Using extensive interviews, archival imagery and filmed events, this profile piece shows how one man overcame the trauma of wrongful conviction to achieve his dreams. Instead of falling into despair, he does everything he can to prevent other people from experiencing the injustice he did. Jeff’s story illustrates how there is still work to be done in forming a fairer legal system.

Audience

Despite what Jeff’s been through, this is an inspirational, heart-warming story of human triumph. It would especially appeal to law students, criminal justice activists, advocacy

organizations focused on the rights of incarcerated individuals such as The Osborne Association, and high schools, particularly ones with criminal justice or forensics courses. The film would also be compelling for those who have been incarcerated and their families.

Jeff is also excited about this film and plans to promote it through his foundation and social media. He's interested in screening it at events he speaks at too. He's a strong advocate in the criminal justice community with a big following that would definitely enjoy this film.

I have also formed connections within the criminal justice community through this documentary and other film work. I have connections with organizations like The Osborne Association, The Marshall Project, Release Aging People in Prison, and The Fortune Society, all of which support the rights of the incarcerated and the formerly incarcerated. Publishing or screening the film through one of these platforms would allow me to effectively reach those interested in and affected by incarceration.