



Discussion guide developed by Heartland Truly Moving Pictures to accompany *The Soloist*, a Truly Moving Picture Award-winning film. A Truly Moving Picture Award winner is a film that unlocks the vast potential of the human spirit and enables us to view stories that display courage, integrity and hope, taking entertainment to a higher level.

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



# THE SOLOIST

## One Film Can

Heartland Truly Moving Pictures, a non-profit organization, recognizes and honors films and filmmakers whose work explores the human journey by expressing hope and respect for the positive values of life. We believe that one film can move us to laughter, to tears, or to make a difference. *The Soloist* is a movie that demonstrates that One Film Can.

## Synopsis

From the director of the Academy Award®-nominated *Atonement*, Joe Wright, and starring Oscar® winner Jamie Foxx and Oscar® nominee Robert Downey Jr., comes this poignant and ultimately soaring tale. It is based on an incredible true story of a disenchanting journalist's transformative odyssey through the hidden streets of Los Angeles, where he discovers and builds a most unlikely friendship with a man from those same streets, bonding through the redemptive power of music.

Columnist Steve Lopez (Downey) is at a dead end. The newspaper business is in an uproar, his marriage to a fellow journalist has fallen apart and he can't entirely remember what he loved about his job in the first place. Then, one day, while walking through Los Angeles' Skid Row, he sees the mysterious bedraggled figure Nathaniel Ayers (Foxx), pouring his soul into a two-stringed violin. At first, Lopez approaches Ayers as just another story idea in a city of millions. But as he begins to unearth the mystery of how this alternately brilliant and distracted street musician, once a dynamic prodigy headed for fame, wound up living in tunnels and doorways, it sparks an unexpected quest. Imagining he can change Ayers' life, Lopez embarks on a quixotic mission to get him off the streets and back to the world of music. But even as he fights to save Ayers' life, he begins to see that it is Ayers – with his unsinkable passion, his freedom-loving obstinacy and his valiant attempts at connection and love – who is profoundly changing Lopez.

All books and movies are somehow inspired by real life events. *The Soloist* is based on the true story of "LA Times" columnist Steve Lopez and his friendship with Nathaniel Anthony Ayres. The columns began in 2005 and the book was published in 2008.

Learn more about the book and the Lopez's Points West series in the "LA Times", at  
[www.soloistmovie.com](http://www.soloistmovie.com)

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## An Impactful Relationship

If a friend is someone who inspires, who challenges, who sends you in search of some truer sense of yourself, Nathaniel is indeed a friend.

*Steve Lopez, The Soloist p. 211*

While *The Soloist* touches on many important issues and themes, friendship is a thread that runs throughout the movie. The story is not only about Steve Lopez's relationship with Nathaniel Anthony Ayers, but about Ayers' relationship with his sister and Lopez's with his ex-wife.

Think about the relationships in the movie and in your own life as you explore the questions below.

## Discussion Questions

- Who inspires and challenges you?
- Ayers had as much to offer to Lopez in lessons that Lopez did not expect; he expected to be the one helping in their relationship. Think about your friendships and explore the different lessons that they taught you. How did these friendships change you?
- As a columnist it would have been easy for Steve Lopez to use Ayers; story as a means to generate newspaper sales and readership, but instead Lopez developed a real and lasting relationship with Nathaniel Anthony Ayres. Why do you think Lopez took such a personal interest in Ayres?
- How did Lopez's relationship with Ayers impact you? Are there aspects of their relationship with which you can identify when taking into consideration your personal relationships? What are the similarities in their relationships? What are the differences?
- It takes a little more effort on Lopez's behalf to befriend Ayers than it would perhaps to befriend another individual. Do you ever invest additional time to create strong friendships? What are some examples. If you aren't one to take the time, why do you think this is?
- What things in a friendship are meaningful to you? Does the type of friendship and the relationships displayed in *The Soloist* make you evaluate any of the relationships in your life? For what reasons and in what ways?

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## Mental Illness

It was important to honor the fact that a significant friendship isn't going to cure an illness like schizophrenia and that it is always going to be an ongoing struggle for Nathaniel.

*The Soloist* Screenwriter Susannah Grant

Screenwriter Susannah Grant had a very large task ahead of her as she adapted Lopez's story for film. She realized that as uplifting and powerful as the film's message of friendship was, at the core she couldn't alter the portrayal and severity of mental illness in the movie.

As you discuss the questions below consider Susannah Grants' quote.

## Discussion Questions

- After watching *The Soloist*, do you view mental illness in the same way?
- Did the way *The Soloist* was filmed help you feel a better connection to what might be going on in Nathaniel's mind? What elements in particular helped you?
- Do you know or have you ever known an individual who suffered from mental illness? Whether it was depression, schizophrenia, or another illness, how did you deal with it as a friend or family member?
- Contrast the compassion of the social worker at the shelter with his unwillingness to help Nathaniel get on medication. Why do you think he was unwilling given his obvious interest in helping people?
- Were you able to identify with Steve Lopez and Nathaniel Anthony Ayres' family's conflict as they learned to walk the fine line between helping Ayres and making him do something against his will? Do you believe you would be able to show the same strength of character Lopez and Ayres' family demonstrated in *The Soloist*?
- Describe Lopez's journey in the movie and those events that helped change his way of thinking about how to help Ayers.

### Learn More About Mental Illness

Mental Health America  
[www.nmha.org](http://www.nmha.org)

National Alliance on Mental Illness  
[www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)

# THE SOLOIST

## Understanding Homelessness

The people I met on Skid Row are the reason I'm making this film.

Joe Wright, Director of *The Soloist*

Joe Wright follows the quote above with, "They are the kindest, gentlest, funniest and most honest people I've ever met. If you let them, they will change your life. I hoped involving them would bring an authenticity to the film, but also would do something for them in return. It would be work, they'd learn skills and it would be something to be proud of. These people are the most disenfranchised people in American society and don't generally have a voice. I wanted our film to be able to give them that voice."

Think about Joe Wright's quote, excerpted from "*The Soloist* Production Notes", courtesy of Paramount Pictures, as you discuss the questions below.

## Discussion Questions

- After viewing *The Soloist*, do you feel that Director Joe Wright accomplished what he set out to do by giving homeless citizens a voice?
- How did you hear their voices and were you impacted by what they had to say?
- Did the depiction of homelessness in the movie cause you to think about the issue of homelessness in a different way? Is homelessness as portrayed in *The Soloist* what you have seen of homelessness in your own community, or out in the world?
- What currently is being done to address homelessness locally or nationally and what can you do to help?
- Paramount Productions has paired with Participant Media to generate awareness and to prompt action using the inspiration and lessons found in *The Soloist*. They have developed resources to use in your own community to help combat the stigma associated with homelessness and mental illness.

Use the information on the following page to share with others and help call them to action.

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## Myths & Facts

The truth about homelessness and mental illness

**Myth:** Homelessness has declined dramatically in recent years.

**Fact:** The criteria through which the government defines homelessness can change as often as these surveys are taken. Sometimes people living in cars, or staying with their relatives are considered homeless; sometimes they are not. Therefore it is not always an equal comparison to the previous count.

**Myth:** Mental illnesses are brought on by a weakness of character.

**Fact:** Mental illnesses are a result of the interaction of biological, psychological, and social factors. Research has shown genetic and biological factors are associated with schizophrenia, depression, and alcoholism. Social influences, such as loss of a loved one or a job, can also contribute to the development of various disorders.

**Myth:** Children do not experience mental illnesses.

**Fact:** A report from the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health showed that in any given year 5-9 percent of children experience serious emotional disturbances, which can result in mental illness.

**Myth:** Homeless people will probably always be homeless.

**Fact:** The length of homelessness varies from person to person. Many spend years on the streets and then are able to get permanent housing.

**Myth:** Psychiatric disorders are not true medical illnesses like heart disease and diabetes. People who have a mental illness are just "crazy."

**Fact:** The fact is that brain disorders, like heart disease or diabetes, are legitimate medical illnesses. Research shows there are genetic and biological causes for psychiatric disorders, and they can be treated effectively.

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## Tips

Small ideas to make a big difference

Start Making a Difference. Every individual can take action to help solve homelessness. Here are five small things you can start doing now.

Make eye contact: Say hello – greet homeless individuals the same as you would a friend or colleague.

Give small supplies: Instead of money, give Ziploc bags of toiletries, socks, food or grocery coupons. Keep a supply in your car.

Donate clothes: Give your gently worn clothes to a local homeless facility.

Watch your mouth: Don't call people experiencing homelessness "bums," "transients," or even "the homeless." They are still people first.

Volunteer: Work directly with people experiencing homelessness.

Bust the stigma and share stories: Feeling support and being part of a community is empowering to those struggling with a mental illness. By listening to others or by sharing personal experiences, you help to break the silence that keeps people from being open about their illness.

A printable pocket list that contains the **Myths & Fact** and **Tips** information, along with more in-depth information and ways to connect, interact and take action can be found at [www.takepart.com/thesoloist](http://www.takepart.com/thesoloist).



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## Music, Passion, and Inspiration

I'm discovering though, that Nathaniel isn't alone. Music is an anchor, a connection to great artists, to history and to himself.

Steve Lopez, *The Soloist* p 37

Music is a very powerful force in *The Soloist*; its impact is second only to the impact of relationships and friendship. It is something that, as Lopez writes in his book, connects Ayres to so many things larger than himself. We see it in the movie not only in Ayres' connection to all of his instruments and sheet music but in his connection to past musicians as he plays near the statue of Beethoven or in the shade of Disney Concert Hall.

Lopez writes that Ayres' passion for music was inspirational to him and he then begins to wonder about his own inspiration and connection to other writers. Consider the ways you become inspired as you discuss the following questions.

## Discussion Questions

- Think about your connection to the thing or things about which you are most passionate. Can you identify with Nathaniel's connection to other musicians throughout history and his passion for music?
- Can you identify with Lopez's awe and envy of Ayres' passion, and his reignited search to find his own?
- What are those ways that you find inspiration? Has the way you seek inspiration changed throughout your life? In what ways has this process changed for you?
- Has what you are passionate about changed throughout your life? How have events in your life influenced these changing passions?
- Music may not be your passion, but is certainly an impactful and influential medium that is a prevalent part of life. How is music an integral part of your everyday life?
- Do you consider a particular musician or genre of music to be more impactful than others? How does that artist or genre impact you differently?

There are several organizations striving to generate awareness about the importance of art and music in education.

Learn more at

**VH1 Save the Music** [www.VH1savethemusic.com](http://www.VH1savethemusic.com)  
**Americans for the Arts** [www.AmericansForTheArts.org](http://www.AmericansForTheArts.org)



# THE SOLOIST

## Take Action

We felt that in the right hands this could become a film about love, about inspiration, about the power of how people can help each other.

Foster on wanting to make *The Soloist* movie

The story of *The Soloist* did make it into the right hands and became a movie that explores love and the power all people have to help one another and make a difference.

Don't let the momentum of the film's impact stop when you walk out of the theatre. By becoming invested in your community, volunteering and taking part, you can help prolong the impact of the message of the film and make a difference in the world around you.

Participant Media is a wonderful resource for getting involved, connecting with others, and taking action. Visit [www.takepart.com/thesoloist](http://www.takepart.com/thesoloist) for information about homelessness and mental illness, learn more about some organizations that are already making a difference and find opportunities where you can plug in and have impact in your own community.

Participant Media  
Take Part at [www.takepart.com/the soloist](http://www.takepart.com/the soloist)

## Truly Moving Moments

*The Soloist* has been honored as a Heartland Truly Moving Picture Award-winning film. This award was created to honor films released theatrically that align with Heartland's mission to recognize and honor films and filmmakers whose work explores the human journey by artistically expressing hope and respect for the positive values of life.

These award-winning movies are made up of moving and inspiring moments – those moments that cause you to think, see something in your life differently, be inspired to do something. It's what makes the movie and its message remain with you well after you've left the theatre.

Think about *The Soloist*. What were the moments that stood out to you? How did they make you feel? How will they cause you to think about things differently in the future? Share those moving moments with others at [www.TrulyMovingPictures.org](http://www.TrulyMovingPictures.org). Simply create a membership or login if you already have one and then search the movie list for *The Soloist*. You can leave your review of the movie or thoughts about your Truly Moving Picture in the "Thoughts and Reviews" section.