

# FOR ONCE IN MY LIFE



DISCUSSION GUIDE

A Film by Jim Bigham and Mark Moormann

*For Once in My Life* is the story of a unique band of singers and musicians, and their journey to show the world the greatness – and killer soundtrack – within each of them. The 28 band members have a wide range of mental and physical disabilities, as well as musical abilities that extend into ranges of pure genius. *For Once in My Life* explores the struggles and triumphs, and the healing power of music, as the band members' unique talents are nurtured to challenge the world's perceptions.

## FROM THE FILMMAKER



I first heard about the band when my co-director Mark Moorman told me about his friend, band leader Javier Pena, and the work he was doing at Goodwill. Mark and I have fairly diverse backgrounds in the film industry, making our living jumping between feature films and TV commercials. Since both of us have the same passion for documentaries, we were looking for projects that we might work on together. So, in the fall of 2007, my wife Cathy and I visited the manufacturing plant where the Spirit of Goodwill band practices.

It was all a little awkward; everyone was very formal and a little ill at ease as we walked through this massive place where

military uniforms were being made. It was spotlessly clean, but a busy factory all the same. We were led to a sort of classroom-looking place in the back, where a group of nervous looking musicians were quietly waiting for us. After a brief and polite introduction, Cathy and I sat down for our own private concert. Javier counted off 1-2-3-4, and WHAM, a wall of sound broke over us. The room became alive; everyone moved to the beat of the music, individually finding their groove. From that moment on I knew we had to make this film happen.

Over the following week we had our first meeting with the principal parties to figure out how to make this film. There were a lot of ideas floating about the room about the direction and target audience. The one thing we all agreed on was that the primary goal was to make a film that would be seen and appreciated by as many people as possible. I knew that this film was a very hard sell, and that we needed to make the film entertaining while delivering a very important message.

In the first days of filming, we shot the band trying to record a CD and some sit-down interviews. Everything felt a little stiff and staged. Over time, by hanging out in the practice room, we all got a lot more relaxed with each other. The individual personalities began to surface, and we saw the internal social structure of the band. Our best footage was captured by taking a fly on the wall approach, yet we still did not have a story or direction.

The big break, of course, came with the invitation for the band to play for the conference of mayors; now the film had a direction or storyline to build towards. As the personalities began to blossom, we realized our next dilemma was that we were so rich in characters that we would have to make tough choices about who would get the focus of the cameras. Mr. Dennis Pastrana, the CEO of the Goodwill of South Florida, was really fantastic. He totally got where we were going with the film, and pretty much gave us open access. Javier Pena is an unlimited source of positive creative energy. Although he works two different jobs and has a family and a long commute, he was always thinking about how to make the film move forward. Over the years, we spent hours and hours on the phone talking about the songs, the band, and how to shape the story. During this time we became very good friends.

In time, I found I was spending more and more time going to the band room to film. The crew size was getting smaller. I was becoming a one-man band, and was also becoming a member of the Goodwill band family. Practices went late, so the band members missed their scheduled special service transport. I began running carpool or riding home with them on public transport. During these trips, I got really candid perspectives of their difficult lives. The more time I spent with each of them, the more I appreciated what they had to say. What they so openly shared with me they in return were asking me to tell the world their stories. The obligation was growing. Weaving this all into a succinct tale had me nervous. I really wanted to get it right.

Over time, working with the editor, Amy Foote, who was great, we found a balance that hopefully entertains, while changing the audience's perspective about people with disabilities. I'm hoping that the film also challenges them to look differently at their own abilities. This journey has been a wonderful life learning experience for me personally. Finally, I have to say this film has been very much a group effort, and I feel very fortunate to have been part of it. We feel we have been very lucky to be able to tell the story of the band.

– Jim Bigham, Director/Producer of *For Once in My Life*

## THE FILM

The Spirit of Goodwill Band is a group of 28 musicians and singers, all of whom are adults with special needs and employees of Goodwill Industries of South Florida. In spite of the wide range of disabilities of its members, the band is a cohesive group with a professional sound. *For Once in My Life* tells the story of these remarkable musicians and provides a glimpse into their personal lives.

Goodwill Industries of South Florida, one of the five largest Goodwills in existence, operates training and employment programs for people with special needs. For over fourteen years it had also offered its clients the opportunity to participate in a very unique music program. In the mid-1990s, Goodwill hired Javier Pena to be choir director; it was his idea to expand the group and form a band. Although Javier has a full time job in Ft. Lauderdale, he makes the one-hour trip to South Miami once a week to work with the band. As director, it is his task to help this very disparate group learn to play their individual instruments, to play them together, and to sound good.

The immense challenge of this group of people becomes more apparent when the film introduces some of the individual band members. Terry, the saxophone player and vocalist, has been blind since he was a toddler, when his father dropped him on his head. Melissa is a percussionist with Down syndrome, whose determined mother raised her as a valued member of her family. Christian, a keyboardist who is blind and autistic, learned to play the piano as a child. David, a trumpeter and vocalist, suffered brain damage at birth; he has cerebral palsy and is mentally challenged. Others who suffer from some degree of mental disability are Sam, a drummer and vocalist, who was born with multiple birth defects; Patricia, a soprano, who becomes Sam's wife; and Nancy, also a soprano, who lives with her two siblings who are mentally disabled. Godwin, a keyboardist who is autistic, was taught to play the piano by his twin brother Godfrey. Jary and Juan, brothers who are trombone players, are mentally challenged and have learning disabilities due to difficulties their mother experienced while giving birth.

Javier works with these individuals, patiently coaching them and continually expressing his confidence in their ability. To these musicians, Javier is more than a bandleader; he is a disciplinarian and a friend, and to some, he is a father figure. His dedication to the group helps each one put forward his or her best effort to create music filled with a passion that touches audiences. Veterans at a VA hospital in West Palm Beach were deeply moved by the band's rendition of "God Bless America," and school children on a field trip to Goodwill Industries became completely swept up in the music of "I Wanna Be Like You." Miami mayor Manny Diaz and music producer Emilio Estefan, auditioning the band ahead of its big performance for the National Mayor's Conference, are unable to restrain themselves from joining in an exuberant performance of "La Bamba."

The Mayor's Conference is an opportunity for the band to go to the next level, to play for a large audience in a major venue: the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts, in Miami. Javier steps up the rehearsal schedule, adding "Conga," a new number with complex rhythms, which the band must learn in a much shorter time than usual. Tension is high when the big day arrives. There are several potential snags – the cramped stage arrangement for the band, feedback problems, and Melissa's concern about falling off the riser. But the problems are resolved, fears are allayed, and the concert is a great success.

For the members of the band, the concert is a chance not only to showcase their talents, but also to present themselves as role models. It's a way to help change attitudes about people with disabilities, by showing what people with disabilities can do when given an opportunity to develop their full human potential. And Javier, after the thrill of the concert, is back at work auditioning new band members seeking the same opportunity to show what they can do.



Photo Credit: Mark Moorman



## INDIVIDUALS FEATURED IN FOR ONCE IN MY LIFE

### Band Members & Singers

Terry – sax & vocals (blind)  
 Melissa – percussion (down syndrome)  
 David – trumpet & vocals (cerebral palsy)  
 Jary & Juan – brothers, trombone players (mentally challenged)  
 Christian – keyboard (autism, blind)  
 Sam – drums & vocals (mentally challenged; multiple birth defects)  
 Patricia – soprano (mentally challenged)  
 Nancy – soprano (mentally challenged)  
 Godwin – keyboard (autism)

### Others

Dennis Pastrana – CEO of Goodwill Industries of South Florida  
 Manny Diaz – Mayor of Miami  
 Emilio Estefan – music producer

### Javier Pena – Music Program Director, Spirit of Goodwill Band

Javier Pena, age 40, is a native of Venezuela, who studied music theory and piano at the Yamaha School of Music in Caracas. In 1995 he moved his family to Florida, and the following year he was hired to be Goodwill's choir director. At that time he had no experience working with people with disabilities. Several months into the job, he began to notice the innate musical abilities among the members and proposed creating a band and offering instrumental music training. With the support of Goodwill's CEO, Dennis Pastrana, and starting with donated instruments, Javier was able to realize his goal of putting together a real band that could tackle complex arrangements.

Pena is a spiritual man who believes that every individual has value. As music director he tries to find each person's God-given talents and work with them. The Goodwill band members present a major challenge because they all have very different abilities, and thus each one must be taught differently. With the help of Omar Rodriguez, the brass instructor, and Lisa Velazquez, the voice coach, Pena has been able to bring the entire band up to a high level of expertise.

In addition to directing the Spirit of Goodwill Band, Pena works full time in media production. To help balance his very full plate, he has the support of his wife and children. Plus, he loves what he does and finds working with the band very rewarding, which makes it all possible.



Photo Credit: Mark Moorman

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### The Many Uses of Music

Music occupies an important place in the lives of most people. Many of our daily activities are accompanied by music, as are most major life events, such as weddings and graduations. Music may provide background to the performance of other tasks, or it may be used to enhance the mood of a situation. It may liven up an event, such as a party, or it may act as a calming agent when nerves are frayed. People who don't speak the same language may find common enjoyment in the music of their different cultures.

Studies show that our brains are hardwired for music; it fires up the same pleasure centers of the brain that are stimulated by sex, chocolate, caffeine, or cocaine, but without any of the negative outcomes. Music can stimulate brain waves to resonate in sync with the beat, either faster or slower. Laboratory studies have shown that music can change heart rate, respiration, blood pressure, and galvanic skin response. It has also been shown to affect levels of neurochemicals such as dopamine, which is associated with a feeling of well-being or contentment, and the neurotransmitters adrenaline, norepinephrine, and serotonin, which regulate numerous functions of the cardiovascular and endocrine systems.

Noted psychiatrist and neurologist Oliver Sacks points out that music exists in every culture and that all individuals have innate music playing inside them; music forms a kind of social glue for groups that sing together, including those at work or marching to battle. Music has been found to soothe crying babies, to counteract depression and certain physical problems in the elderly, to enhance the enjoyment of exercise, and to reduce pain associated with dental procedures.

Given its universality, its capacity to connect people, and its pleasure-producing qualities, music provides a natural tool for working with a variety of groups, for a variety of objectives. Music therapists have designed interventions that

- promote wellness
- manage stress
- alleviate pain
- express feelings
- enhance memory
- improve communication
- promote physical rehabilitation

Music is so many things: a universal language, a soother of the "savage breast," a ready resource to help us through good times and bad; it's seemingly magical in its versatility.

Sources: <http://levitin.mcgill.ca/pdf/LifeSoundtracks.pdf> ; and [http://www.dovesong.com/positive\\_music/archives/basement/Music%20and%20the%20Brain.asp](http://www.dovesong.com/positive_music/archives/basement/Music%20and%20the%20Brain.asp)

### Americans With Disabilities Act

In July 1990, President George H.W. Bush signed into law the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which protects the civil rights of people with disabilities. The public policy goals were to provide people with disabilities equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency.

The ADA defines "disability" as an impairment (physical or mental) that substantially limits one or more major life activities (working, walking, talking, seeing, hearing, or caring for oneself), a record of such an impairment, or being regarded as having such an impairment.

ADA guarantees equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities in

- Employment
- Public accommodations
- Transportation
- State and local government services
- Telecommunications

### Disability by the Numbers

The following figures provide an idea of the scope and types of disabilities in the U. S. population:

**54 million** – the number of people who have a disability (19 percent of the civilian non-institutionalized population); this includes

- 5 percent of children 5 to 17
- 10 percent of people 18 to 64
- 38 percent of adults 65 and older

**3.3 million** – the number of people 15 and older who use a wheelchair

**16.1 million** – the number of people with limitations in cognitive functioning or who have a mental or emotional illness that interferes with daily activities

**46 percent** – the percentage of employed people aged 21 to 64 who have some type of disability

**\$2,250** – the median monthly earnings for people aged 21 to 64 who have a non-severe disability (compared with \$2,539 for those with no disability and \$1,458 for those with a severe disability)

### Of non-institutionalized adults 18 years and older:

- 34.5 million (15 percent) have hearing trouble
- 19.4 million (8.6 percent) have vision trouble
- 15.9 million (7 percent) are unable to walk a quarter mile (or have great difficulty)
- 35.6 million (16 percent) have some form of physical functioning difficulty

Sources: <http://www.disabled-world.com/disability/statistics/ada-anniversary.php> and <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/disable.htm>

### IDEA for Infants, Toddlers and Teens

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was originally enacted by Congress in 1975 to ensure that children with disabilities have the opportunity to receive a free, appropriate, public education. The law has been reauthorized and amended a number of times, most recently in 2004, but its basic objectives remain the same. Two major sections of the law are explained below:

**Part B** – Special education and related services should be designed to meet the unique learning needs of eligible children with disabilities, preschool through age 21. Focusing on 13 specific categories of disability, the act requires that public schools create an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for each student who is found to be eligible. The act also stipulates that students with disabilities should be prepared for further education, employment, and independent living.

**Part C** – Infants and toddlers with disabilities should receive early intervention services from birth through age 3. The basis for these services is an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP), written by parents and professionals to address the needs of the baby or toddler.

### TOPICS AND ISSUES RELEVANT TO FOR ONCE IN MY LIFE

A screening of *For Once in My Life* can be used to spark interest in any of the following topics and inspire both individual and community action. In planning a screening, consider finding speakers, panelists or discussion leaders who have expertise in one or more of the following areas:

- Music education
- Music therapy
- Programs for disabled adults
- Special education
- Mainstreaming/inclusion
- Equal employment opportunities
- Civil rights
- Research on music & the brain



Photo Credit: Robert Hughie

## THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. Did this film change the way you think about people with disabilities? If so, describe the change.
2. Was there anything about any of the individuals featured in the film that particularly surprised you? In other words, did you see or learn anything that did not match your expectations of people who are disabled?
3. What do you make of the fact that the fathers were absent from so many of the band members' families? How do you explain the apparent relationship between their father's absence and having a child who is disabled in the family?
4. Why do you think Javier, the band director, has been so effective in getting the group to perform well?
5. What were your feelings as you watched and heard the band perform its various numbers throughout the film? How did knowing the stories of the musicians affect your feelings?
6. What lessons do you think the students of St. Louis School took away from their visit to Goodwill Industries?
7. Psychologists and music education experts say there is a difference between making music and performing music. In the film, what differences, if any, did you notice between the band's experience playing with Mayor Diaz and Emilio Estefan and its experience playing for the National Mayor's Conference?
8. Do you think the band succeeded in helping to reshape attitudes about the abilities of people who are disabled with its concert for the National Mayor's Conference? Why or why not?
9. How does the song "For Once in My Life," from which the film borrows its title, support the content of the film?
10. Are any of the individuals in the film personally inspiring to you? Which one(s) and why?



Photo Credit: Robert Hughie

## SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Along with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual and that people might do as a group. Here are some ideas to get you started:

1. Is your community compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)? What about your workplace? To help you do an assessment, visit the ADA National Network (<http://adacourse.org/solutions.php#tB>), which answers questions pertaining to public accommodations, businesses, employment, and other topics.
2. Explore job training and employment opportunities for the disabled in your community. You might start by checking with the local government office of rehabilitation services; find state listings at The Ticket to Work site, a Social Security Administration website (<https://secure.ssa.gov/apps10/oesp/providers.nsf/bystate>). You can also obtain information from the Goodwill in your community or from other social service agencies. Ask about volunteer opportunities with these agencies and offer your services. If you have a business that is looking to hire, consider listing your positions with an online employment service for people with disabilities, such as Ability Jobs (<http://www.jobaccess.org/>).
3. Support music programs in your community by starting a used instrument drive. Local schools and other organizations can benefit by using the collected instruments in band and in other music instruction programs. Read an article about how one community implemented such a project (<http://www.eastcountymagazine.org/node/3318>).
4. With your family, or with a group of friends, plan some times to sample different types of music. Talk about why you like or don't like certain numbers or certain types of music. Alternatively (or in addition), arrange informal jam sessions where the group plays and/or sings together. Add simple rhythmic movements, when appropriate, for a gentle workout.
5. Become aware of how you refer to people with disabilities. Learn to communicate using "people first" language. Find out more about appropriate language and language to avoid at a web page created by the Centers for Disease Control ([http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/pdf/DisabilityPoster\\_Photos.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/pdf/DisabilityPoster_Photos.pdf)).
6. Volunteer with any of the local agencies in your community serving people with disabilities. Find local opportunities at Network for Good (<http://www.networkforgood.org/topics/health/disabilities>).

For additional outreach ideas, visit [communitycinema.org](http://communitycinema.org). For local information, check the website for the PBS station in your area.

## RESOURCES

<http://www.4onceinmylife.com/home.html> - The website *For Once in My Life* contains a history of the band, information on band members, and bios for the production team.

### General information

<http://www.goodwill.org/> - The Goodwill Industries website contains comprehensive information on Goodwill's employment and social services, volunteer opportunities, and partnership programs.

<http://www.nod.org/> - The National Organization on Disability (NOD) is a private, nonprofit organization that focuses on increasing employment opportunities for the 67 percent of working-age Americans with disabilities who are unemployed.

<http://www.aapd.com/> - The American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD), the country's largest cross-disability membership organization, organizes the disability community to be a powerful voice for change – politically, economically, and socially – and acts as a national voice for change in implementing the goals of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

<http://adaanniversary.org/> - The ADA National Network is a comprehensive one-stop resource for information about the American with Disabilities Act.

<http://www.ada.gov/> - This U.S. Department of Justice website contains information and technical assistance on the Americans with Disabilities Act.

<http://www.disability.gov/> - This is a federal government website connecting the disabled community to information and opportunities.

<http://www.disabled-world.com/> - This website provides the worldwide disability community with free resources, information, and assistance.

<http://www.familyvillage.wisc.edu/university/stats.htm> - This University of Wisconsin site lists a variety of sites containing health and disability statistics.

### Learning Disabilities

<http://www.lidaamerica.org/> - Learning Disabilities Association of America is a nonprofit volunteer organization serving tens of thousands of members with learning disabilities, their families, and the professionals who work with them. The LDA has over 200 state and local affiliates in 42 states and Puerto Rico.

<http://www.ldonline.org/questions/transition> - LD Online is a web-based resource that provides up-to-date information and advice about learning disabilities and ADHD, including school-to-work resources for learning disabled adults.

<http://www.nichcy.org/Pages/Home.aspx> - National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities offers a wide range of bilingual services to families and professionals who work with children and youth.

<http://www.fape.org/> - Families & Advocates Partnership for Education is a partnership that aims to improve the educational outcomes for children with disabilities, based on legislation contained in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

### Work Opportunities

<http://federaljobs.net/disabled.htm> - The Disabled Hiring program lists jobs and training programs with the federal government.

<http://www.dol.gov/odep/> - The Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy site offers guidance to employers and the disability community on a wide range of issues pertaining to employment opportunities.

<http://www.workathometruth.com/disability.php> - Work At Home Truth provides people with accurate and unbiased information about work-at-home jobs (telecommuting positions or freelancing) and home businesses for people with disabilities.

<http://www.google.com/Top/Society/Disabled/Employment/> - This Google directory lists employment resources for the disabled.

### Programs for Disabled Adults

<http://www.back2college.com/educationfordisabledadults2.htm> - This page of the Back to College website lists useful resources for adult students with disabilities.

<http://www.guidedtours.com/> - The Guided Tour, Inc. runs travel programs for men and women with developmental and physical challenges.

<http://www.specialolympics.org/> - Special Olympics is an international organization that provides year-round sports training and athletic competition in a variety of Olympic-type sports for children and adults with intellectual disabilities.

<http://www.google.com/Top/Society/Disabled/Arts/> - This site lists a wide variety of visual and performing arts programs for the disabled.

<http://nadc.ucla.edu/> - The National Arts & Disability Center promotes the full inclusion of audiences and artists with disabilities into all facets of the arts community by advancing the work and employment of artists and by providing technical assistance to arts and cultural organizations.

### Music

<http://www.musictherapy.org/> - The website for the American Music Therapy Association contains a wide variety of information – including journals, publications, and media stories – about the benefits of music and music therapy.

<http://www.mtabc.com/page.php?60> – The Music Therapy Association of British Columbia offers a brief but comprehensive article on benefits of music therapy in geriatric care.



**FOR ONCE IN MY LIFE WILL AIR NATIONALLY ON THE EMMY AWARD-WINNING PBS SERIES *INDEPENDENT LENS* ON FEBRUARY 1, 2011. CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS.**

Directed by: Jim Bigham and Mark Moormann  
 Produced by: Jim Bigham  
 Creative Directors: Amy Foote and Javier Pena  
 Executive Producer: Lourdes Little  
 Associate Producers: Cathy Bigham and Christina Vidal  
 Cinematographer: Mark Moormann  
 Additional Cinematography: Jim Bigham  
 Music Engineer: Philip Colodetti  
 Editor: Amy Foote  
 Additional Editor: Brian Bayerl

*For Once in My Life* is a production of Big Blue Box Productions, Inc. The Emmy Award-winning series *Independent Lens* is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) with additional funding provided by PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts.

COMMUNITY CINEMA is the national community engagement program of the Independent Television Service. COMMUNITY CINEMA works to leverage the unique and timely content of the Emmy Award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens* to build stronger connections among leading organizations, local communities and public television stations around key social issues and create more opportunities for civic engagement and positive social change. To find out more, visit <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/communitycinema/>.



Photo Credit: Robert Hughie