

Using the Power of Cinema as a Tool for Therapy

By Matt Jenkins, Communications Officer

In today's digital world, the power of cinematic magic and realism uses scripted scenarios and a cast of compelling characters to take viewers on a journey. While people often relate to a character or their experiences on the screen, can a movie really help confined juveniles overcome problems and issues, or provide motivation to share their struggles with others?

The New York Times recently featured a unique program – Reel Talk -- developed as a juvenile group therapy tool through the doctoral research of North Carolina Juvenile Justice staff psychologist Dr. Jamal Scott. Reel Talk is a program that uses pre-edited clips from popular, culturally relevant movies to tackle topics such as gangs, peer influence, prison culture, recidivism and male role models, in a group therapy setting with the Youth Detention Center students he counsels.

"One of the most difficult things to do, is sit five or six adolescent black males in a circle, and ask them to talk about their feelings," states Dr. Scott. "Societal, cultural and racial pressures teach black men they can't show a vulnerability (which could be conceived as weakness) such as expressing our feelings."

Early studies from the 1990s helped to fuel Dr. Scott's research and develop the program of cinema-therapy he uses today. "Unlike when an adult asks them a question, if they hear a message from their peers in the group (or the younger characters in a scene) they are more likely to internalize, recognize similar feelings and open up to share," said Scott.

One recent afternoon, the group was eating snacks provided by Dr. Scott and watching clips from the 1992 movie "Juice" to discuss making positive friend choices and dealing with peer pressure. Listening to the comments, it was apparent the three teens were processing the scenes showing before them and relating them to their own life experiences.

Scott believes the kids have responded well to his request that they have courage to handle situations differently than during the 15 or 16 years of their life. His group therapy is based on the principles that change is possible with enough information; we're all moral people; and that individuals have free will. Though Scott accepts that many of the young men he works with may not know or understand the repercussions of their actions at first, he impresses upon them that once they do learn, repeating negative behavior(s) at that point becomes a conscious choice. The most difficult sessions to teach deal with absentee fathers, but Dr. Scott believes they are also the most impactful for the young men. His efforts are breaking ground and breaking down the barriers these young men use to shield themselves from a society to which they may feel they do not relate.

