

Movie Kit



American
Spaces

Freeheld



Year of Release: 2015

Rating: PG-13

Length: 1h 43 min

English level: Medium/Hard

Director: Peter Sollett

Starring: Julianne Moore, Ellen Page, Michael Shannon

Themes: LGBT Rights, Civil Society Empowerment, American Dream

Warning/General Advisory

Includes some profane language and mild sexual content.

“We’re just average people, we have a house, a dog, and we pay our taxes”

Stacie Andree’s character in *Freeheld*

Context

Based on a true story, *Freeheld* takes place in Ocean County, New Jersey in 2005. After veteran police detective Laurel Hester (played by Julianne Moore) is diagnosed with terminal cancer, she tries to have her pension benefits passed on to Stacie Andree (played by Ellen Page) – her same-sex domestic partner. For married heterosexual couples, this request would have been routinely granted; however, the local elected officials denied Laurel Hester’s request. Afraid Stacie will lose their house after she dies, Laurel refuses to accept the board’s decision and spends her final days fighting to win the pension she earned for the woman she loves.

Even though state law at the time permitted same sex couples to leave their pensions to their surviving partners, it was not *required* for local governments to do so. Laurel Hester’s request went before the elected officials – called *Freeholders* - in November. (In New Jersey, the county legislature in each of the state’s 21 counties is called a “Board of Chosen Freeholders.”) They unanimously voted down her request to leave her death benefits to Stacie Andree.

In the days following this refusal, gay rights activist Steve Goldstein (played by Steve Carell) and others mobilized hundreds of demonstrators to protest the local ruling. This civil society action helped propel Laurel Hester’s plight to national media attention bringing pressure on the Freeholders to reverse their decision. Finally, in January 2006 with Hester only having weeks to live, the legislators voted that she could leave her pension benefits to her same-sex partner.

Key Vocabulary/Places

- **LGBT** – an acronym that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. There are variations to this acronym to include a broader set of people, such as LGBTI (includes *intersex* individuals) and LGBTQ (Q can be used for those who are *questioning* their sexual identity).

- **Homophobia** – dislike or prejudice against homosexual people
- **Freeholders** – Local government legislators in the U.S. state of New Jersey. The term “Freeholders” is unique to New Jersey, and the origin of the term is from the New Jersey State Constitution.

Discussion Questions

- In New Jersey in 2005, the state law allowed for non-married couples to leave their pension to a domestic partner. Why did the Freeholders seek to deny Laurel’s pension to Stacie?
- Officer Dane Wells is Laurel Hester’s heterosexual police partner. Seeing the tough situation she is in, he becomes one of her leading advocates and supporters. Do you think people are becoming more accepting of LGBT individuals and their rights?
- What role did civil society play in influencing the Freeholders to reverse their decision in Laurel Hester’s favor?
- How are members of the LGBT community treated in your communities?
- What protections are in place to prevent discrimination towards members of the LGBT community?

Basic Timeline for LGBT Rights in the USA

Here is a basic timeline of some recent and significant events around the civil rights campaign for LGBT rights in the United States:

- **1969** – New York City Police raided the gay-friendly Stonewall Inn. The demonstrations that followed transformed the LGBT rights movement from a fringe movement into a mainstream one.
- **1977** – Harvey Milk became the first openly gay person to be elected to public office in America. He was elected to the Board of Supervisors – San Francisco’s legislative body.
- **1996** – The Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), enacted by Congress, excluded same-sex couples from being recognized as married under federal law, making them ineligible for federal marriage benefits
- **2003** – The U.S. Supreme Court overturned state laws that effectively made LGBT relationships illegal. Since this decision, same-sex relationships have been legal in all 50 states.
- **2004** – Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same-sex marriages.
- **2012** – Tammy Baldwin became the first openly gay Senator in American history.
- **2013** – The U.S. Supreme Court overturned DOMA. Now, if a same-sex couple is married in a state that allows such marriages, the couple will be recognized as married by the federal government and receive federal marriage benefits.
- **2015** – The U.S. Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage in the United States. This decision requires a state to license a marriage between two people of the same sex and to recognize a marriage between two people of the same sex when their marriage was lawfully licensed and performed out of state.