

Minding the Gap: Skateboarding to “get away” in decayed Rockford, Illinois

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Directed by Bing Liu

The award-winning 2018 documentary *Minding the Gap* depicts the coming-of-age of three young working-class men for whom skateboarding became, as someone in the movie says, “a thing to, like, get away. It was kind of a life-or-death thing.”

This sensitive, humane movie was directed and photographed by Chinese-American Bing Liu, who also appears in the film as one of the three central protagonists, all working-class skateboarders living in (or, in the case of the slightly older Liu, returning to) economically depressed Rockford, Illinois, 85 miles northwest of Chicago.

Minding the Gap informs us that “about 47 percent of all Rockford workers, 60,000 total, earn less than \$15 per hour.” These are the conditions against which the movie unfolds. However, this social element remains largely in the background in favor of more personal concerns. In addition to their shared love of skateboarding, all three of the subjects have grown up in abusive households, and this becomes a central focus of the film.

As Liu (who was born in China in 1989 and moved with his family to the US when he was five) explained in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, the film uses skateboarding as a “Trojan horse” in order “to get young people engaged in the issues of domestic violence and child abuse.”

The film opens with Zack Mulligan and Keire Johnson trespassing for a skateboarding session. Along with several other close skateboarding friends, the two young men appear to be inseparable. “Skateboarding is more of a family than my family,” Keire says, with Zack echoing this sentiment: “We formed a family together ... to look out for each other because no one else was looking out for us.”

Becoming a father forces the somewhat wild yet affable Zack to start getting serious. He pledges to drink and smoke less. He starts working as a roofer. “That’s hard work,” a GED testing center employee tells him. “It is,” Zack replies. The drinking and smoking continue.

Discussing his “becoming a man” upon turning 18, Keire says, “I just feel like [I need to] get a good job, or get, like, *a* job, just *ajob* in general.” Keire gets his “first real job” as a dishwasher at a restaurant. “I don’t like telling people that I’m a dishwasher,” he says, “but then again I really don’t care, ‘cause it’s how I make money. ... I just don’t wanna work some job I hate for the rest of my life.”

Keire starts to open up about having been “disciplined” by his late father. “They call it child abuse now,” he says. The young man harbors unresolved feelings about his father. He regrets that one of the last things he said to the older man was, “I hate you.”

Meanwhile, Zack and his girlfriend Nina raise their baby boy Elliot in shifts, each parent staying home while the other works. Zack is not being scheduled enough hours by his job at a park to keep up with the bills. “I’m a week behind every time,” he says. The young couple’s relationship suffers, and they often quarrel. Eventually, Nina leaves Zack and, taking their baby, moves in with relatives.

Nina then tells Liu that Zack hit her, which prompts Liu to go into his own family’s history of domestic violence. As we learn, Liu’s stepfather was physically abusive toward Liu, his Chinese-American immigrant mother and his half-brother.

Minding the Gap continues to follow the young men through their struggles to get by in Rockford. Each of the characters endures varying degrees of pain and

suffering, but Zack's situation is perhaps the most moving of all. Their lives are captured with a considerable degree of sensitivity.

There is a genuine lyricism to many of the documentary's skateboarding sequences. Liu's camera follows and glides alongside the young men as they skateboard down the middle of often empty downtown streets and across a bridge over the Rock River, a tributary of the Mississippi. *Minding the Gap*'s most memorable during these fleeting moments. These simple images evoke the yearning for freedom that has both intensely personal and broader historical-political implications.

And there is also something liberating about the skateboarders' defiance of pointless private property strictures when they trespass on apparently abandoned sites and, in one instance, climb a fire escape to gain access to a rooftop parking lot for their skateboarding. This provides them a space in which to practice their beloved sport free from intimidation by the police who hound them on the streets below.

Even the interviews in *Minding the Gap* are beautifully lit and composed. Like naturalistic portraits, those sequences feel formally connected to the *cinéma vérité* style of the scenes in which life appears to happen before Liu's camera, as opposed to the flat and dull "talking heads" of the typical documentary.

Invariably, the skateboarders' bliss evaporates when a trick goes wrong or a board gets broken. In one such moment Keire smashes his skateboard with a violence that seems to express more than just a frustration about a failed maneuver or even an abusive father.

Beneath the surface of the individual sources of anger to which the film is oriented lie the larger social sources—feelings of hopelessness and despondency about the future. "It's like this place just eats away at you," Keire says at one point. "I just don't wanna get trapped here in Rockford like a lot of people have."

"As far as the title, 'Minding The Gap,'" Liu explains, "it refers to the gap between so many things and the society. It's race, class, gender and the gap between violence and discipline, the gap between childhood and adulthood."

Liu's film lacks, however, a systematic probing of the causes of despair experienced by his characters, and many others like them. Rockford, Illinois, once a furniture manufacturing center, resembles many larger

and smaller cities in the deindustrialized "Rust Belt" of the Midwest that have suffered decades of social devastation.

How did life in Rockford become so bleak for so many? Who is responsible? As we previously reported, "The 2008 crisis dealt a devastating blow to Rockford's working class. The official unemployment rate in 2010 reached a peak of 19 percent, and nearly 30 percent of the city's population fell below the poverty line at one point."

The majority of working class youth can only look forward to low-paying jobs in the area, with the best ones—at the UPS hub, for example—offering no more than a poverty wage of \$15 an hour. The nearby Chrysler auto factory in Belvidere, Illinois carried out mass layoffs earlier this year.

There are genuinely moving moments in *Minding the Gap*, including the struggles of Zack and Keire. But the biggest "gap" in the film is its failure to examine the chasm between the hopes and dreams of working class youth and the reality of a failed, crisis-ridden society that offers them so little.



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