Finding hope behind bars through the music of Taylor Swift

Poitier Film School partners with Amity Foundation for the LA film premiere of ‘Daylight’ documentary

By Barbara VanDenburgh, ASU News
October 21, 2026

Who do you think of when you think of a Swiftie? Picture with your mind’s eye the world’s biggest Taylor Swift fan, who finds joy and a deeper expression of feeling in the pop star’s lovestruck lyrics. Who do you see?

Did you envision a middle-aged man serving what could have been a life sentence for murder?

Joe Garcia is the unlikely subject of “Daylight,” a new short film by director Jon Kasbe, inspired by “Listening to Taylor Swift in Prison,” an essay Garcia wrote for The New Yorker in 2023 while serving time in a California state prison.

Kasbe’s film, which debuted in LA on Oct. 13 at a screening event hosted by The Sidney Poitier New American Film School, captures Garcia’s love of Swift’s music and how it helped him connect with the outside world and keep his love of life alive. It also helps him process his feelings for Amber, a woman with whom he was in a relationship before he went into prison — and for whom he still held a torch behind bars.

“She jokes with me all the time, ‘You committed a murder, you went to prison and you turned into a teenage girl. How did that happen?’” Garcia said about Amber, to the laughter of fellow inmates in the film.

Garcia, who is now free on parole after time served and is reunited with Amber, joined the event remotely after the screening for a panel discussion moderated by filmmaker and Poitier Film School faculty member and fine arts specialist Richard Ray Pérez.

Garcia said he was thrilled to be able to share his story with this LA audience.

“I hope the film keeps people thinking about the power of personal transformation and second chances,” he said.

The screening event was organized by Amity Foundation, a group dedicated to improving public health and safety by providing resources to justice-involved people on their journey to recovery and re-entry.

“Participating in this panel was a powerful reminder that lived experience is not just a perspective worth hearing, but a form of expertise that can challenge misconceptions, inspire meaningful conversations, and help shape a more just and equitable criminal legal system,” said Dominique Tanks, community liaison with Amity Foundation and one of the evening’s panelists.

He was joined in conversation by Domonique Perkins, founder of People Pottery’s Project; Allen Burnett, co-founder and executive director of Prism Way; and director Kasbe. Doug Bond, president and CEO of Amity Foundation, introduced the evening.

Kasbe expressed gratitude for the opportunity to reflect on the film alongside Garcia.

“I was especially moved by the conversations around second chances, community and the power of storytelling to change how we see one another,” Kasbe said.

The screening and talkback were hosted in the stunning Toshizo Watanabe Culinary Cultural Center at the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center in downtown LA, a space lined by windows that open to the center’s James Irvine Japanese Garden. It’s a respite of peaceful greenery in a bustling city of steel and concrete, a place of meditation and reflection in harmony with the themes of “Daylight,” as Garcia reflects on the man he was and the lives he impacted as he puts in the work for a brighter future.

For Peter Murrieta, Poitier Film School deputy director and interim associate dean of Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts in Los Angeles, the event showcased the kind of community ASU is working to build in Southern California, bringing together students, filmmakers, activists and cultural institutions together in a shared appreciation of storytelling and the arts.

“This is what serving your community looks like,” Murrieta said. “This is why we are in LA, to serve the people of LA with programming that builds community through inclusion.”

During his moderation, Pérez shared appreciation for how “Daylight” showcases the humanity of incarcerated individuals and doesn’t engage with the stereotypes typical in film and television. In one scene set in prison, incarcerated individuals discuss the music that most moves them — one man extolls the virtues of Billie Eilish, while another pronounces his love of Beethoven’s fifth and seventh symphonies.

Then they join hands with Garcia and lift their voices in unison: “It’s never too late to change!”

This story originally appeared on ASU News.

Main image



Poitier Film School faculty member and fine arts specialist Richard Ray Pérez moderates a panel discussion after a screening of the short film "Daylight." Courtesy photo

Text image(s)


DAYLIGHT
A SHORT FILM BY JON KASBE
OFFICIAL SELECTION TELLURIDE MOUNTAINFILM 2024
OFFICIAL SELECTION NASHVILLE FILM FESTIVAL 2024
OFFICIAL SELECTION DOC NYC FILM FESTIVAL 2024
OFFICIAL SELECTION INDY SHORTS FILM FESTIVAL 2024
THE NEW YORKER
A KASBE FILMS AND REVUE STUDIOS PRODUCTION
MUSIC BY NATHAN HALPERN WRITTEN BY JOE GARCIA EDITED BY JEFF GILBERT, ACE
CINEMATOGRAPHY BY JON KASBE NICHOLAS KRAUS LEO MACO NATE HURTSELLER DAVID BOLEN ROB GOURLEY
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS CHRIS SMITH STACY SMITH TY STIKLORIUS JON LIEBMAN PRODUCED BY ZOE BOGOVIN DIRECTED AND PRODUCED BY JON KASBE

No caption