STUDY GUIDE

A SMALL ACT
A FILM BY JENNIFER ARNOLD

Photograph by Patti Lee/Courtesy of HBO

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TRIBECA YOUTH SCREENING SERIES

FALL 2010: HBO DOCUMENTARY FILMS
ABOUT THE FILM

When Hilde Back sponsored a young, rural Kenyan student, she thought nothing of it, and certainly never expected to hear from him. Years later, Chris Mburu, now a Harvard graduate and a Human Rights Lawyer for the United Nations, decides to find the stranger that changed his life. Inspired by her generosity, Chris starts a scholarship program to serve students like himself—they are bright, but can’t afford to pay school fees. With the creation of Chris’ fund, these students have new hope, but the program is small, and not everyone can qualify for a scholarship. With clarity and grace, A Small Act bears witness to the ripple effect a single action can create.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKER

JENNIFER ARNOLD, WRITER/DIRECTOR/PRODUCER

Jennifer graduated from UCLA and University of Nairobi with a B.A. in African History and returned to UCLA for a MFA in Film. Her award-winning film, Maid of Honor, screened at Sundance before airing on HBO/Cinemax and Film 4. Jennifer returned to Sundance with her internet series, “The Mullet Chronicles,” which was developed into the documentary, American Mullet and released by Palm Pictures and Lionsgate. Jennifer also co-directed a documentary for Ethan Coen and wrote a motorcross script, Speedway, which was selected for Berlin Talent Campus’ script clinic, IFP’s No Borders and FiND’s Directors Lab/Fast Track Program.

THINKING AHEAD

Q: What words and images come to mind when you think of Africa? What do you think that life is like for school students in countries like Kenya?

Q: Why is access to an education important? What does education mean in your life?

Q: In the film, Hilde Back says, “If you do something good it can spread in circles like the rings on water.” Do you agree? Why?
THE FILM IN CONTEXT

EDUCATION SAVES LIVES

“I don’t want the kids in this village to feel that the Hilde Back Education Fund is only giving them money—I want them to feel it is giving them hope.” –Chris Mburu

Education is a fundamental human right: every child is entitled to it. It is critical to our development as individuals and as societies, and it helps pave the way to a successful and productive future. When we ensure that children have access to a rights-based, quality education that is rooted in gender equality, we create a ripple effect of opportunity that impacts generations to come. Did you know:

- An estimated 120 million children worldwide are not in school. Almost 80% of these children live in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.
- According to UNICEF, 22,000 children die each day due to poverty. 171 million people could be lifted out of poverty if all students in low-income countries left school with basic reading skills—that is equivalent to a 12% drop in the number of people living on less than $1.25 a day.
- In Kenya, if women farmers are given the same education opportunities as their male peers, their productivity in farming and agriculture increases by up to 22%.
- A child born to a mother who can read is 50% more likely to survive past the age of 5, and in sub-Saharan Africa an estimated 1.8 million children’s lives could have been saved in 2008 if their mothers had at least secondary education.
- In Malawi, the share of women who know that HIV transmission risks can be reduced by taking drugs during pregnancy is only 27% for women without any education, but rises to 59% for women with secondary education.

Adapted from The UNICEF Education for All Global Monitoring Report. Photo from www.asmallact.com

THE RIPPLE EFFECT

“If you do something good, it can spread in circles like the rings on water.” –Hilde Back

Volunteerism and social activism are powerful means of engaging people in tackling social and economic challenges around the world and in our own communities. Contributing time and resources, even in small amounts, benefits both society at large and the individual volunteer by strengthening trust, solidarity and reciprocity among citizens, and by purposefully creating opportunities for participation.

Q: Do you think that making positive changes in your own community can have an impact on the global community? In what ways? Give an example of small acts that you have witnessed that have had a big impact.

Q: Improving access to quality education is not just an issue in Africa. There is currently a major debate happening in the United States about how we can make our schools better. As a student, what can you do to improve the quality of education for your school community?

Q: How has someone supported you through an act of generosity or kindness? What impact did it have on who you are now and the choices you make?

Q: Think of three small acts that you can make right now that will make a difference for another person or your community. Would your acts include making a donation? Would you volunteer your time? Could you bring people together organize a school campaign to raise awareness about an important issue?

Adapted from the report Volunteering and Social Activism: Pathways for participation in human development by the World Alliance for Citizen Participation, the International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE) and the United Nations Volunteers.
HOW TO BE A CRITICAL VIEWER

Being a critical viewer is different than just watching a movie. Critical viewing is about being able to examine the information that a movie, commercial, music video or TV show is giving you and ask meaningful questions about the information that you receive. Media makers create work for many reasons: to inform, persuade, entertain, shock, sell, etc. A critical viewer asks, “What goal is the media maker trying to achieve, and what impact do they want to have on me?”

A critical viewer is someone who:

• Listens carefully to what is being said in the movie
• Pays attention to the details used by the filmmaker to convey the message of the film
• Asks meaningful questions

Being a critical viewer will help you understand:

• The themes and issues that the filmmaker is addressing
• The reasons why the filmmaker chose to make the movie
• The message of the movie

In this study guide you will find background information, activities, and questions that will help you practice being a critical viewer.
Now that you’ve watched the film and worked through the Study Guide, take some time to reflect on the following questions. These worksheets are an important step in practicing your critical viewing skills. Write down your answers and compare with your friends and classmates.

Every film has a **MESSAGE** that the filmmaker wants to communicate. There are a few key questions you can ask yourself to help figure out a film’s message.

What do you think the film is about?

What is the filmmaker trying to say about the subject? What evidence is used?

Why do you think the filmmaker made this film?

**PRODUCTION** describes the process of making a film and includes writing the script, choosing different types of shots while filming, editing the final footage, and choosing music. The choices made during production affect how we experience the movie.

How is the story of the film told? Does it remind you of other films you have seen? If so, which ones and how? If not, how was it unique?

How does the way the film is made change the way you understand the topic? (Think about the structure of the film, the music, etc.)
CRITIQUE: WHAT DO YOU THINK?

When you CRITIQUE a film as a critical viewer you are doing more than saying whether you like it or not, you are forming your own opinions about the quality of the film, clearly explaining your thoughts, and using evidence from the film to support these opinions.

What did you find interesting about the film? Why?

Why is the film interesting to other viewers (even if it wasn’t interesting to you)?

Why do you think the filmmaker took the time to make this film?

What would you have done differently if you were the director?

What kind of audience is the film targeting? (Remember, one film can target many different kinds of audiences!)
FURTHER READING

If you’re interested in learning more about some of the issues presented in the film, check out these books.

3 Cups of Tea
By Greg Mortenson
Greg Mortenson’s story of how his failed attempt to climb one of the highest mountains on Earth became a personal journey to alleviate poverty, educate girls, and overcome cultural divides.

Half the Sky
By Nicholas Kristof & Sheryl WuDunn
Nicholas Kristof and his wife, Sheryl WuDunn, make a brilliantly argued case for investing in the health and autonomy of women worldwide.

The Challenge for Africa
By Wangari Maathai
Wangari Maathai, Nobel Peace Prize laureate and founder of the Green Belt Movement, offers a refreshingly unique perspective on the socio-economic challenges facing Africa today.

Dead Aid
By Dambisa Moyo
In this book, Zambian Economist Dambisa Moyo takes a controversial look at international aid and the goals and reasons behind the anti-aid movement.

FURTHER WATCHING

If you liked this film, you might also like some of these other films.

I Want to Be a Pilot
The powerful story of a poverty stricken boy in one of the poorest parts of Kenya who looks up towards the heavens and dreams of being an airline pilot.

Schindler’s List
Academy Award winning film that tells the story of Oskar Schindler, who risked his life to save more than 1,000 Jews from certain death in concentration camps.

Kibera Kid
The award winning short film about Otieno, a 12 year old orphan from Kibera, Kenya living with a gang of thieves, who must make a choice between gang life and redemption.

Hotel Rwanda
Amid the holocaust of tribal fighting in Rwanda that sees the savage butchering of hundreds of thousands of people, one ordinary hotel manager musters the courage to save more than 1,000 helpless refugees.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Discover more information on the web about this film and related topics.

A Small Act:
www.asmallact.com
Official film website including details on how you can make a difference with a small act of your own.

USC Shoah Foundation Institute
http://college.usc.edu/vhi/
Established by Steven Spielberg to gather and share video testimonies from survivors and other witnesses of the Holocaust.

UNICEF
www.unicef.org
Provides long-term humanitarian and developmental assistance to children and mothers in developing countries.

GOOD
www.good.is
An online magazine dedicated to promoting positive social change whose subscription fees go entirely to charity.

GET INVOLVED

What’s YOUR Small Act?
The film is the centerpiece of a “What’s Your Small Act?” campaign designed to use the program to encourage people to participate in “small acts” in their own lives and communities. HBO in collaboration with Network for Good will be making “good cards” available to audiences at select regional screenings as well as to a number of viewers on a first come, first serve basis who are fans of the HBO Documentary Films Facebook page (facebook.com/hbodocs) or followers of HBO Documentary Films on Twitter (twitter.com/hbodocs) on July 12th when A SMALL ACT premieres on HBO. Recipients can redeem the $10 cards as donations to any of the 1.2 million causes listed on Network for Good. Visitors can also search the site easily for volunteer opportunities by zip code, learn more about Hilde Back Education fund and other causes they care about.

Learn all the ways you can get involved in the “What’s Your Small Act?” campaign by visiting www.networkforgood.org/asmallact
ABOUT TRIBECA YOUTH SCREENING SERIES
This program provides NYC public school students and teachers with access to free, educationally-relevant and challenging films. Each screening is followed by a Q&A, study guides and supplemental educator materials are provided, and teachers are strongly encouraged to utilize films as part of their curriculum. This monthly-series strives to expose New York City students to independent films and help educators and students incorporate film-viewing into their classroom work. For more information about TFI’s youth programs, please visit www.tribecafilminstitute.org/youth or email youth@tribecafilminstitute.org

ABOUT HBO DOCUMENTARIES
Whether measured by awards, critical acclaim, subscribers, profitability or viewers, Home Box Office, Inc, is America’s most successful premium television network and home to two 24-hour premium television services—HBO® and Cinemax®. Together, both networks reach over 40 million subscribers in the United States via cable and satellite delivery. In the documentary area, HBO Documentary Films is consistently at the forefront of programming, producing and developing some of the most provocative, ground-breaking and award-winning films. HBO Documentary Films focus on contemporary issues, allowing viewers entry to worlds rarely seen. These films have won virtually every major programming award including the Academy Award®, the Emmy® Award, the George Foster Peabody Award, and the Alfred I. DuPont-Columbia University Award.

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The Tribeca Film Institute (TFI) is a year-round nonprofit arts organization that empowers working filmmakers through grants, professional development and resources, while also helping New York City students discover independent film and filmmaking.