HERSTORY NOW: CELEBRATING THE POWER OF THE EVERYDAY WOMAN

MIDDLE OF NOWHERE

A FILM BY AVA DUVERNAY

EDUCATOR GUIDE

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TRIBECA YOUTH SCREENING SERIES®
Winner of the 2012 Sundance Film Festival Award for Directing, *Middle of Nowhere* depicts the emotional journey of Ruby (Emayatzy Corinealdi), an ambitious young medical student whose dreams are derailed when her husband, Derek (Omari Hardwick), becomes incarcerated. Confronted with the sobering reality of Derek’s eight-year prison sentence, Ruby struggles to maintain her identity on the outside while being supportive of her man on the inside. Trapped by circumstance and bound by responsibility, Ruby’s life takes an unexpected turn when a chance encounter presents her with the opportunity to reclaim the life she had almost given away.

*AVA DUVERNAY*

The first African-American woman to win the Best Director Award at the Sundance Film Festival, Ava DuVernay is a writer, director, producer, and distributor of independent film. In addition to her feature film, *Middle of Nowhere*, DuVernay’s directorial work includes the critically acclaimed dramatic feature *I Will Follow*, as well as the musical documentaries *This Is the Life* and *My Mic Sounds Nice*. She is the founder of AaFFRM, the African-American Film Festival Releasing Movement, a film distribution company that works to organize African-American film festivals and orchestrate theatrical releases for black independent films.

*Tracee Worley*

is an educator and curriculum developer who loves to design student-centered learning experiences. She has developed and implemented K-12 curricula, professional development workshops, and technology-based educational materials through her work with organizations such as Staff Development Workshops, ITVS, Tribeca Film Institute, Urban Arts Partnership, and the Brooklyn Historical Society. Her innovative work has been featured by NBC, NPR, and The New York Times. She holds a B.A. in African-American Studies from UC Berkeley, an M.A. in Education from Brooklyn College, and is currently pursuing an advance certificate in Digital Media Design for Learning from New York University.
FILM IN CONTEXT

Over the past 40 years, the United States has witnessed a dramatic increase in the use of prisons to combat crime. According to the Vera Institute for Justice, the prison rate has skyrocketed, growing by 700 percent from 1970 to 2005, a rate that is outpacing crime and population rates. Even more striking than the overall growth in the prison population are the ways in which incarceration rates disproportionately impact men of color: 1 in every 16 African American men and 1 in every 36 Hispanic men are incarcerated in comparison to 1 in every 106 white men. This extraordinary racial disparity in the criminal justice system is described as “mass incarceration,” a rate of incarceration so high that it affects not only the individual offender, but the entire fabric of a community.

Researchers have found that incarceration’s negative consequences reach far beyond the prisoner, extending well into the lives of the wives and girlfriends of those who are locked up. Megan Comfort, a sociologist who spent years getting to know women visiting men at San Quentin State Prison makes a compelling argument that, “women whose loved ones and close acquaintances are caught in the revolving door of ‘corrections’ experience restricted rights, diminished resources, social marginalization, and other consequences of penal confinement, even though they are legally innocent and reside outside of the prison’s boundaries.”

Although millions of women experience the pains of incarceration, little is known about their stories. Middle of Nowhere director Ava Duvernay notes that she was inspired to give voice to this seldom talked about community whose lives are rarely seen cinematically: “There are women in waiting, women in this kind of middle place, and they’re disregarded, they’re invisible to us. So the goal is really just to kind of bring that out in the open and explore all the different relationships that these women are experiencing.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

LIFE ON THE OTHER SIDE
Middle of Nowhere begins with the story of an incarcerated African-American male, yet the film defies the stereotypes of what you would expect from a film about prison. How is Middle of Nowhere different than other films you have seen about prison? Why do you think the director chose not to portray life for the prisoners beyond the waiting room? How are the loved ones of prisoners affected by their incarceration? How does Derek’s prison sentence strain his relationship with Ruby? How are Ruby’s relationships strained as a result of Derek’s incarceration?

WOMEN-IN-WAITING

The film’s director calls women like Ruby “women-in-waiting”: they are the mothers, daughters, wives and sisters of men who are incarcerated. Ruby made tremendous sacrifices, including dropping out of medical school and working overtime to pay for Derek’s legal fees and child support for his daughter. In which ways are the romantic partners of prisoners “women-in-waiting”? How do others react to Ruby’s decision to wait for her husband? If you were in Ruby’s shoes, would you have done anything differently?

BEING IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE

The sense of being in the “middle of nowhere” is established physically and metaphorically throughout the film. Not only does it symbolize the location of the prison Ruby travels four hours round-trip to visit Derek, but it also can describe the emotional space she finds herself in as a result of his absence. What role does physical and emotional distance play in the film? How does being stuck in the “middle of nowhere” affect Ruby’s identity? How does she find a way out of that space?

DISCUSSION PROMPTS CONT.

FAMILY

Another important aspect of Ruby’s journey is her strained relationship with her mother, Ruth, who is very hard on her daughters and their choices. Ruth is vocal about her disapproval with Ruby’s decision to put her dreams on hold in order to support Derek. How would you describe Ruth, Rosie, and Ruby’s family dynamic? What do you think Ruth’s life has been like? What expectations does she have of her daughters? Are those expectations realistic? How does Ruby meet her mother’s expectations? How does she defy them? Have you ever felt pressured to achieve someone else’s expectations of you?

SELF-DISCOVERY

The more Ruby learns about her husband’s activities in prison, the more her faith in their future starts to fade. She spends weeks ignoring Derek’s calls and after his parole is denied, launches a journey of soul-searching and self-discovery. Things get even more complicated for her after a gentle-natured bus driver, Brian, begins to pursue her romantically — and she begins to let him. What does Ruby discover about herself after learning about Derek’s infidelity? How does her relationship with Brian make her question what she really wants? Do you agree with the choices she made for herself and her marriage?

VIDEO MODULES

1. “Don’t Stop For Me”
(00:00:00-00:04:13)

2. “The Alleged Contact”
(00:44:38-00:49:20)

3. “You Were Right”
(00:49:21-00:54:58)

4. “What’s Happening Next”
(1:11:11-1:14:13)

5. “Say Something”
(1:38:30-1:42:50)

6. “In A Middle Place”
(1:29:23-1:38:30)
The prison population has exploded in the United States over the last several decades. One in one hundred Americans—2.3 million people—are currently in jail or prison. Approximately 1 in 43 children has an incarcerated parent. In this activity, students will learn more about the state of the criminal justice system.

PART A: WHO IS LOCKED UP?

Discuss the following questions as a whole class:

The prison population has exploded in the United States over the last several decades. One in one hundred Americans—2.3 million people—are currently in jail or prison. Why do you think so many Americans are locked up? What puts a person at risk of going to prison?

Write the word PRISON on the whiteboard or chart paper in the front of the room. Have students form a line at opposite end of the room. Explain to them that you are going to read a list of statements and if the statement applies them, they will take one step forward toward prison. After students move, explain that you will read another statement that explains how the group is represented within the criminal justice system.

Statements:

- If you are an African-American male, take a step forward closer to prison.
- If you are a Latino male take a step forward closer to prison.
- If you are Native American, take a step forward closer to prison.
- If you are a woman of color, take a step forward closer to prison.
- If you are one in every 36 Latino males age 18 or older is incarcerated (aclu.org)
- If you are one in every 25 Native Americans is incarcerated under the supervision of the criminal justice system (prisonpolicy.org)
- If you are a woman of color, take a step forward closer to prison.
- If you or anyone you know is a high school dropout, take one step forward closer to prison.
- If you or anyone you know is growing up with only one parent, take a step forward closer to prison.
- 56% of jail inmates report that they grew up in a single-parent household or with a guardian (NYTimes)
- If you or anyone you know is growing up with only one parent, take a step forward closer to prison.
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PART B: DEBRIEF

Have students return to their seats and discuss the following questions as a class:

- Why do you think people of color are incarcerated at such a high rate?
- What do you think should be done about it?
- How have your family and/or community been impacted by incarceration?

Using a whiteboard or chart paper, create a brainstorm web with the following question written in the middle: Who is affected when someone goes to prison? Examples may include: family members, romantic relationships, parental relationships

PART A: Impact of Incarceration Brainstorm

Share the following statistics with students:

- Over 2.7 million children have one parent in prison
- Family members of prisoners are largely members of economically vulnerable communities
- More than half of prisoners with children live more than 100 miles from where they lived before prison
- 10% of prisoners with children live more than 500 miles away from where they lived before prison

Using a whiteboard or chart paper, create a brainstorm web with the following question written in the middle: Who is affected when someone goes to prison? Examples may include: family members, romantic relationships, parental relationships

PART B: Impact of Incarceration

Distribute the IMPACT OF INCARCERATION worksheet. Explain to students that the worksheet is a tool for understanding incarceration on different levels. Model for students how to fill in each level by explaining what the different levels mean:

- Individual Level impacts highlight how imprisonment can affect the inmate on an emotional and psychological level (i.e.: Feelings of anger, guilt, loneliness, loss of income)
- Relationship Level impacts highlight how imprisonment can affect the inmate’s personal relationships including friends, family, intimate partners (i.e: family instability, loss of intimacy, loss of parent/child bond, added stress to extended family members mistrust, having to travel far distances to visit the inmate, financial loss and added expenses, stigma, feelings of shame and embarrassment)
- Community Level impacts highlight how communities are affected by imprisonment (i.e.: draining of community resources, widespread disenfranchisement)

Once students have finished their worksheets, have them share out.

Discuss:

- How does looking at imprisonment from these different levels help us understand the impact of incarceration?
- How much does one level affect the others?
- Do you know anyone who has been incarcerated? How did your relationship with that person change during the incarceration?
How is Ruby's current life different from her previous life with Derek? What rules and regulations do friends and families of an inmate have to follow during a period of incarceration? Would you be willing to "wait it out" as Ruby has? Why or why not? Is it possible to keep a separation and a close friendship and love going at the same time?

PART A: Ruby's Sentence
On a chalkboard, whiteboard, or large piece of paper, draw a figure inside of a prison cell and write "Ruby" at the top of the cell. Ask students to brainstorm a list of ways that Ruby is "doing-time" on the outside as she shares with Derek with critical events of his arrest, legal proceedings, and imprisonment. Write their suggestions outside of the cell. Suggestions may include: traveling 2 hours each way to visit Derek in prison, dropping out of medical school, waiting for his daily phone calls, etc.

Discuss:
- How is Ruby's current life different from her previous life with Derek?
- What strengths does Ruby exhibit in dealing with her predicament?
- Ruby was suddenly plunged into the role of sole breadwinner and legal assistant once Derek was incarcerated. Have you ever had to change your life so radically to help someone in need? If so, how did you manage?
- Would you be willing to "wait it out" as Ruby has? Why or why not?
- What can communities do to assist the families of the incarcerated?
- Is it possible to keep a separation and a close friendship and love going at the same time?

PART B: Part B: Read
Have students read through New York State’s Department of Correctional Services Handbook for the Families and Friends of DOCS Inmates, which is designed to help loved ones of prisoners better understand the New York State Correctional System (available at http://www.doccs.ny.gov/FamilyGuide/FamilyHandbook.pdf)

Discuss:
- What rules and regulations do friends and families of an inmate have to follow during a period of incarceration?
- Are you surprised by any of the rules/regulations?
- Which would you find particularly challenging?

LESSON 4: POST-SCREENING ACTIVITY 1: SURVIVING AN IDENTITY CRISIS

Each stage of Derek's incarceration proves to be crisis-provoking for Ruby. Throughout the film, we see her fighting for him on the inside, while she attempts to survive her own identity crisis on the outside. In this lesson, students will visually represent the complex and potentially contradictory contexts in which she finds herself in.

PART A: Identity Map
On a chalkboard, whiteboard, or large piece of paper, write Ruby's name in the middle, and then build a web-like diagram to visually represent all of the aspects of her identity. Encourage students to consider her race, family role, gender, education, social class, attitudes, interests, passions, responsibilities, relationships, etc. If you have Internet access in the classroom, you may wish to input students' suggestions into the online word cloud generator, Wordle (http://www.wordle.net).

Discuss:
- In the beginning of the film, which aspects of Ruby's identity, roles, experiences or relationships were most essential to her sense of self? How did those aspects change over time?
- Do any aspects of her identity conflict with others? (For example, does her role as daughter or sister ever come into conflict with her role as a wife?)
- How did she navigate those conflicts and stay true to herself?

PART B: Letter to Derek
In the final scene of the film, Ruby tells Derek that she will no longer serve out the rest of his sentence with him. In her final letter to him, she states that, "I see options in front of me; other roads I can travel." Taking that statement as a starting point, have students brainstorm the other options they could envision Ruby traveling while Derek finishes the remainder of his sentence. Record their answers on the board.

Ask students to choose one of the options from the list and write a detailed letter to Derek from the perspective of Ruby, 2 years in the future, looking back on how she has grown since she decided to move on with her life. Allow time for students to share their letters.
The Prisoner’s Wife: A Memoir
By asha bandele
In her 1999 memoir, poet asha bandele recounts how she came to fall in love with Rashid, a prisoner serving twenty years to life for murder. Bandele challenges stereotypes about the wives of prisoners by telling a story of a mutually fulfilling relationship blossoming in the most difficult of circumstances.

Visiting Life: Women Doing Time on the Outside
By Bridget Kinsella
Bridget Kinsella was a professional woman who found herself falling in love with a man serving a life sentence at Pelican Bay Maximum Security Prison. In this memoir, Kinsella shares the hurdles and hopes of the wives, girlfriends, and mothers of the inmates that she befriends along her unlikely journey.

After Prison, Rebuilding the Family
In this New York Times Interactive Feature, the Gaines family of Owings Mills, MD discusses what life was like while Adam Gaines served 13 and a half years in prison for robbery, and when he came home again.

The Sentencing Project’s Interactive Map
http://sentencingproject.org/map/map.cfm#map
The Sentencing Project provides an interactive map, with incarceration statistics for each of the 50 states. Scroll over the map to see data on the total prison and jail populations, racial disparities in incarceration, disenfranchisement, and budgets.

FURTHER INVESTIGATION
IF YOU'RE INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE ABOUT THE ISSUES IN THE FILM, CHECK OUT THESE RESOURCES

RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS & TEACHERS

FURTHER WATCHING
IF YOU LIKED THIS FILM, YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE SOME OF THESE OTHER FILMS.

FOLLOW THE JOURNALISTS WHO MADE THE FILM THROUGH A VIDEO GAME-STYLE SITE WHICH RECREATES MOTEL ROOMS, PRISON CELLS AND OTHER SCENES OF THE STORY; DISCOVERING INTERVIEWS, STATISTICS AND EXTRA FOOTAGE AS THEY PROGRESS.

Troop 1500 (2005)
At Hilltop Prison in Gatesville, Texas, Girl Scout Troop 1500 unites daughters with mothers who are serving time for serious crimes, offering them a chance to rebuild their broken bonds. An honest look at the struggles of more than 1.5 million American children with parents in prison.

Prison Valley (2009)
This interactive web documentary explores Supermax, a prison in Cañon City, Colorado. Users follow the journalists who made the film through a video game-style site which recreates motel rooms, prison cells and other scenes of the story, discovering interviews, statistics and extra footage as they progress.

The House I Live In (2012)
From the dealer to the grieving mother, the narcotics officer to the senator, the inmate to the federal judge, this film captures heart-wrenching stories from individuals at all levels of America’s War on Drugs. Eugene Jarecki’s documentary features powerful voices advocating for policy change.

The Visitors (2009)
The Visitors takes a unique look at the prison system through the eyes of the travelers who head to remote New York prisons every weekend to visit their loved ones; providing a glimpse into the realities of this often stigmatized community.

GET INVOLVED
CRAVING MORE HANDS-ON EXPERIENCE? CHECK OUT THESE ORGANIZATIONS.

Friends Outside
friendsoutside.org
Since 1955, Friends Outside has been a visionary, pro-active child and family advocate helping families, children and incarcerated individuals cope with the trauma of arrest and incarceration, find a new direction, and move forward with their lives.

Justice for Families
justice4families.org
Founded and run by parents and families who have experienced “the system” directly with their own children (often the survivors of crime themselves), Justice 4 Families is taking the lead to help build a family-driven and trauma-informed youth justice system.

Nation Inside
nationinside.org
Nation Inside is an online hub and offline community that connects and supports individuals and groups building a movement to systematically challenge mass incarceration in the United States.

The Sentencing Project
sentencingproject.org
Established in 1986, The Sentencing Project works for a fair and effective U.S. criminal justice system by promoting reforms in sentencing policy, addressing unjust racial disparities and practices, and advocating for alternatives to incarceration.

RELATIONSHIP

INDIVIDUAL

COMMUNITY

IMPACT OF INCARCERATION WORKSHEET
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ABOUT TRIBECA YOUTH SCREENING SERIES®
Tribeca Youth Screening Series® is a media literacy program begun in 2006 by the Tribeca Film Institute®. The academic year is divided into two series, screened from September through June in partnership with national and neighborhood partners. These screenings are augmented by in-class sessions led by a Tribeca Teaching Artist, who works with a film-specific curriculum written and edited by a team formed through Tribeca Film Institute®. Schools are selected based on relationship, location, and need; in 2012 we will be working in eight schools in New York and New Jersey. Connect and download free curricula at TRIBECAFILMINSTITUTE.ORG

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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.