

# THE RETURN



## GRADES 8-12 CLASSROOM GUIDE

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## TEACHING THE FILM:

**The Return** is a moving documentary that follows the lives and challenges of two California inmates who are released from life sentences with the reversal of the state's notorious three strikes law. A class screening of the film may complement a Social Studies, Social Justice, or Legal Studies curriculum, and will encourage students to consider the purpose and the efficacy of the American criminal justice system. Taught in conjunction with this guide, the film will challenge students to think critically about mass incarceration, justice, and the role of the prison system in addressing social problems like poverty and addiction. Discussion questions and supplemental materials facilitate further research into related topics such as family relationships, post-traumatic stress syndrome and the activist potential of documentary film.

All SFFS Youth Education materials are developed in alignment with California educational standards for media literacy. SFFS Youth Education welcomes feedback and questions on all printed study materials.

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## USING THIS GUIDE

This study guide is intended to flexibly support educators in preparing for and following up on a class screening of **The Return**.

Support materials are intended to facilitate group discussion, individual and collaborative creative exercise, subject-based learning and access to resources for further investigation of material. Educators are encouraged to adapt and abridge the content as necessary to meet their unique learning objectives and circumstances.

## ABOUT THE FILM

In 1994, California voters enacted the Three Strikes law, mandating a sentence of at least 25 years to life for third-time felons. In 2012, voters amended that law with Prop. 36, which added a provision for non-violent offenders and the radical demand that currently incarcerated prisoners be re-sentenced. “Overnight,” the filmmakers explain, “thousands of lifers became eligible for release.” The Return chronicles what happens next—on an individual and statewide scale. Weaving together the confessional musings of newly freed men, interviews with cautiously hopeful family members and on-the-ground coverage of lawyers working to free eligible lifers, filmmakers Kelly Duane de la Vega and Katie Galloway (Better This World, SFIFF 2011) build a case against long prison terms for crimes driven by poverty, addiction and mental illness. Whether following Bilal Chatman—who served 11 years of a 150-to-life sentence—on his bike ride to work or Michael Romano—a lawyer who co-authored Prop 36 and heads Stanford’s Justice Advocacy Project—mustering resources to help clients transition to life outside of prison, the film illuminates the long, fraught, and joyful journey from incarceration to resettlement.

{ Kelly Duane de la Vega and Katie Galloway  
(USA, 2016, 81 min)  
Grades 8-12 }

### Recommended Subject Areas:

African American Studies  
Civics  
Ethics/Religion  
Journalism  
Political Science  
Social Science  
Social Studies

### Key Concepts/ Buzzwords:

Addiction  
Family  
Hope  
Justice  
Mass Incarceration  
Mental Illness  
Poverty  
PTSD  
Three Strikes



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### PRE-VIEWING TOPICS AND DISCUSSION:

**The Return** is a sobering but hopeful film that chronicles the difficult journey from life inside a prison to live in the outside world. The film focuses on a family that is torn apart by the three strikes law, and their efforts to rebuild, forgive and support one another.

Before watching, you might ask students to engage in a reflection exercise in which they consider the possibility of losing a parent for an indefinite number of years. Students may or may not have personal experience with the prison system. Depending on the dynamics in your classroom you may choose to conduct the exercise as a group discussion or as a personal meditation or journaling process.

### POST-VIEWING DISCUSSION:

#### Character and Story

- 1) Describe the Anderson family.
  - What are the Anderson family's values and priorities?
  - How are they like or unlike your family, and families that you know?
  - How does the Anderson family initially react to Ken's return?
  - What challenges do they face in supporting Ken through his re-assimilation?
  - How has the prison system impacted the Anderson family? Do you think that other families experience similar struggles?

- 2) Describe Kenneth.
  - How does the reentry process challenge him?
  - How has the world changed during the time that he was incarcerated?
  - How has Ken's family changed?
  - What mental and emotional challenges does Ken face?

- 3) Describe Bilal.
  - What are Bilal's priorities during the reentry process?
  - How are his circumstances different than Kenneth's?
  - What challenges does Bilal face as he works toward rebuilding his life?
  - What is Bilal's attitude toward these challenges?
    - Do you think that Bilal will continue to succeed?

- 4) What is the Three Strikes Project?
  - Who are the lawyers working for the Three Strikes Project?
  - What are their goals?
  - What are their concerns?
  - What are the limits of these lawyers' abilities? What additional help do they need to fully support their clients through the transition?

#### Context

- 1) What is the Three Strikes law?
  - What was the goal of the law? Why were people given such harsh sentences?
  - What flaws existed within the law? Why was it eventually overturned?
  - How does it feel for the people who were punished under the law to suddenly receive their freedom?

## WHAT IS THE THREE STRIKES PROJECT?



## 2) Describe the reentry process.

- Why is it challenging to come back to society?
- What stresses does reentry place on families?
- How is the reentry situation of the people who were sentenced under Three Strikes and then suddenly released different than the situations of people who were given short-term sentences from the start?
- How do these differences impact the Three Strikes peoples' abilities to re-integrate into society?

## 3) What emotional injuries do people suffer while in prison?

- How does the prison environment affect people who are already mentally ill or unstable?
- How does the experience of living in prison transform the emotional and psychological character of the inmates?

## 4) What is mass incarceration?

What is the philosophy behind harsh sentencing laws?

- Why are prison populations skyrocketing in the United States?
- Which communities are most vulnerable to mass incarceration?
- How do the demographics of today's prison system reflect historic oppression of poor and minority communities?

## 5) Near the end of the film, Kenneth says, "The system is a beast."

- What does he mean by "the system?" What system is he referring to?
- Why is it necessary to imprison people for nonviolent crimes? Can you imagine another way?
- What kind of alternative system could we devise to address addiction, mental illness and poverty?

- How might Kenneth and his family's lives been different if he had been given support instead of prison time?

## Style and Message/Reading the Film for Media Literacy

### 1) How did **The Return** make you feel?

- What thoughts and emotions did you have at the end of the film?
- What conversations did you have with your classmates as you were leaving the theater?
- Did this film provide food for thought?

2) **The Return** is a personal film that brings us very close to the lives of its characters.

- How do you think the Andersons and Bilal felt about appearing in this film?
- Do you think that the presence of the filmmakers was a source of support or stress or both, as they

navigated the complex transition back to the free world?

- Would you feel comfortable sharing such personal details with a film audience?

### 3) How does **The Return** use visual and sound effects to convey Kenneth's feelings of disorientation?

- How do the editors describe Kenneth's flashbacks and his lapses?
- Do you think that these visual and sonic techniques are effective in conveying these feelings to the viewer? Why or why not?

### 4) Do you think that this film has a message?

- What does **The Return** have to say about the current state of our criminal justice system?
- Do you think the film is effective in making its argument?

# WHAT IS MASS INCARCERATION?

## POST-VIEWING ACTIVITIES:

1) Journaling exercise: Review the film.

- Briefly summarize **The Return**.
- What are the most important parts of the story?
- What does this film tell us about law and justice?
- Would you recommend this film to your friends and family? Why or why not?

2) Activity: Imagine an alternate policy

Working alone or in small groups, brainstorm a method to address addiction and mental illness that focuses on healing rather than punishment.

- What would such a system look like? How could it function?
- What challenges would a political figure face in implementing that system?
- What benefits would we reap?

Record your thoughts in a brainstorming format like a list, a whiteboard, a drawing or a web. Then, assemble your idea into a short essay or oral presentation for the class.

### California Media Literacy Standards Addressed In This Lesson:

- **Grade 8:** Standard 1.9 Interpret and evaluate the various ways in which visual image makers (e.g., graphic artists, illustrators, news photographers) communicate information and affect impressions and opinions.
- **Grades 9 & 10:** Standard 1.14 Identify the aesthetic effects of a media presentation and evaluate the techniques used to create them (e.g., compare Shakespeare's *Henry V* with Kenneth Branagh's 1990 film version).
- **Grades 9 & 10:** Standard 1.2 Compare and contrast the ways in which media genres (e.g., televised news, news magazines, documentaries, online information) cover the same event.
- **Grades 11 & 12:** Standard 1.1 Recognize strategies used by the media to inform, persuade, entertain, and transmit culture (e.g., advertisements; perpetuation of stereotypes; use of visual representations, special effects, language); Standard 1.3 Interpret and evaluate the various ways in which events are presented and information is communicated by visual image makers (e.g., graphic artists, documentary filmmakers, illustrators, news photographers).

For more information about media literacy standards in your state, visit:

- MediaLiteracy.com: resources for advancing media education, United States Standards for media literacy education. <http://www.medialiteracy.com/standards.htm>
- Frank W Baker's guide to State Standards Which Include Elements of Media Literacy. [http://frankwbaker.com/state\\_lit.htm](http://frankwbaker.com/state_lit.htm)

### Common Core Standards Addressed In This Lesson:

This lesson addresses the English and Language Arts standards for Reading Informational Texts grades 9-12. Additional specific standard applications are listed below:

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2 Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3 Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.3 Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.



## MEDIA LITERACY RESOURCES

### SCREENING WITH MEANING

We live in a world where technology mediates a large portion of human interaction and the exchange of information. Every projected image, every word published on a page or a website, and every sound from a speaker reaches its audience through the medium, through the language of the device. The ability to parse the vast array of media messages is an essential skill for young people, particularly in a mainstream commercial culture that targets youth as a vulnerable, impressionable segment of the American marketplace. Most students already have a keen understanding of the languages different media use and the techniques they employ to inspire particular emotions or reactions, but they often lack the skill or awareness to fully deconstruct the messages they continuously receive.

Analysis of a media message—or any piece of mass media content—can best be accomplished by first identifying its principal characteristics:

- (1) **Medium:** the physical means by which it is contained and/or delivered
- (2) **Author:** the person(s) responsible for its creation and dissemination
- (3) **Content:** the information, emotions, values or ideas it conveys
- (4) **Audience:** the target audience to whom it is delivered
- (5) **Purpose:** the objectives of its authors and the effects of its dissemination.

Students who can readily identify these five core characteristics will be equipped to understand the incentives at work behind media messages, as well as their potential consequences. Media literacy education empowers students to become responsible consumers, active citizens and critical thinkers.

### CORE CONCEPTS OF MEDIA ANALYSIS

<b>MEDIUM</b>	<p><b>All Media Is Constructed.</b></p> <p>How is the message delivered and in what format?                  What technologies are used to present the message?                  What visual and auditory elements are used?                  What expectations do you bring to the content, given its medium and format?</p>
<b>AUTHOR</b>	<p><b>All Media Is Constructed by Someone.</b></p> <p>Who is delivering the message?                  Who originally constructed the message?                  What expectations do you have of the content, given its author(s)?</p>
<b>CONTENT</b>	<p><b>All Media Is A Language.</b></p> <p>What is the subject of the media message?                  What information, values, emotions or ideas are conveyed by the media content?                  What tools does the author employ to engage the viewer and evoke a response?                  To what extent did the content meet your expectations, given the format/author?</p>
<b>AUDIENCE</b>	<p><b>All Media Messages Reach an Audience.</b></p> <p>Who receives the message?                  For whom is the message intended?                  What is the public reaction to the media content and/or its message?                  What is your reaction to the media content and/or its message?                  How might others perceive this message differently? Why?</p>
<b>PURPOSE</b>	<p><b>All Media Messages Are Constructed for a Reason.</b></p> <p>Why was the message constructed?                  Who benefits from dissemination of the message? How?                  To what extent does the message achieve its purpose?                  What effect does the message have on the audience it reaches, if any?</p>



## THE NON-FICTION FILM WHAT IS A DOCUMENTARY?

A documentary is a film whose goal is to capture truth, fact or reality as seen through the lens of the camera. But there are many kinds of documentaries, and not everyone's idea of truth is the same. The Scottish filmmaker John Grierson coined the term "documentary" in 1926 to describe American filmmaker Robert Flaherty's romanticized culture studies, but nonfiction filmmaking dates back to the earliest motion picture reels.

The definition of documentary expanded as filmmakers experimented with technology and the goals of nonfiction. Avant-garde documentarians, like Dziga Vertov in the 1920s, believed that the mechanical eye of the camera gave a truer image of reality than the human eye and pointed his lens at newly industrialized cities. Leni Reifenstahl's propaganda films from Nazi Germany used the nonfiction form to convey a political message, a slanted truth. The international cinema vérité or observational movements of the 1960s attempted to remove authorship from the documentary. The observational filmmaker hovered like a "fly on the wall" watching the world without commentary. Modern documentaries often seek to raise awareness about a social, environmental or political issue, guiding their audiences toward civic participation and activism.

While watching a documentary, it is important to remember the core concepts of media analysis: who made the film, for what audience and why? The nonfiction format can be deceptively subjective, as all filmmaking involves an inherent selection process: in the images that are shot, the music and narration that accompanies them and, most significantly, the way in which they are all edited together. Media literacy means always analyzing a documentary for its message and authorial intent.

## A BRIEF TIMELINE OF THE DOCUMENTARY

- 1895** The Lumiere brothers developed the first motion picture film reels, capturing brief, unedited clips of life around them called "actualities" (e.g., *Train Arriving at the Station*)
- 1900-1920** Travelogue or "Scenic" films became popular, showcasing exoticised images from around the globe.
- 1926** John Grierson coined the term "documentary" to describe Robert Flaherty's romantic nonfiction film, *Moana*.
- 1929** Dziga Vertov, with the Soviet Kino-Pravda movement, released the experimental nonfiction film, *Man With a Movie Camera*.
- 1935** Leni Reifenstahl released *Triumph of the Will*, the infamous propaganda film that chronicled the 1934 Nazi Party Congress.
- 1939** John Grierson collaborated with the Canadian government to form the National Film Board of Canada, with the initial goal of creating Allied propaganda in support of the war.
- 1960s** The cinema vérité movement began in Europe, shortly followed by "direct cinema" in the U.S. Portable cameras and sync sound allowed filmmakers to capture intimate footage with minimal intervention.
- 1968** The Argentine film, *La Hora de los Hornos (The Hour of the Furnaces)* opened the door to the activist cinema of the 1970s, which used film as a tool to counter capitalist and neo-colonial politics in Latin America.
- 1988** The US Congress mandated that the US government support the creation of independent non-commercial media, and the Independent Television Service (ITVS) was founded.
- 2000s** The widespread use of digital cameras and editing software made the documentary medium vastly more affordable to independent and amateur filmmakers. Video sharing sites such as YouTube and Vimeo allowed amateur filmmakers to broadcast their work.
- PRESENT DAY** The term "documentary" has come to encompass a wide range of nonfiction cinema. Contemporary filmmakers continue to push the boundaries of truth in film and to explore new avenues and applications for the medium.





## THE MAKING OF A DOCUMENTARY

### Idea, Issue, Story.

Even though they are nonfiction films, most modern documentaries structure their content around a traditional story arc, with a beginning, middle and end, as well as characters, and a conclusion, theme or thesis to impart to the audience. Documentary filmmakers begin their projects with an idea or an issue that they wish to explore more deeply. Through research and planning, they develop a comprehensive plan before they begin shooting.

### The Production Process.

To capture candid moments on film, modern documentary makers often leave the camera running, collecting far more footage than the final film requires. They may do this during interviews or in observational-style encounters with their subjects. To get increased access and an observational aesthetic, documentary makers often use handheld cameras and natural light, rather than staging a more formal filming environment.

### Post-Production and the Documentary.

Because a documentary film relies upon candid footage, a large part of the film's construction occurs in the editing room, where you work with what you've captured. A documentary editor will sift through long interviews just to find a few phrases that will summarize the film's message. To emphasize important points and build the story, some documentaries use a voiceover,

an interview or a scripted narrative that brings candid footage together into a coherent statement. An original score can work alongside the voiceover to unify the footage and shape the mood of the film. Audiences often underestimate the power of sound to generate an emotional response. Many documentaries also use charts, graphs and historical footage to add context and emphasize key points.

### Distribution.

Once a film is completed, the filmmaker needs to help it find its audience. Many documentaries are made independently on small budgets, but what's the point of all your work if no one hears your message? Some documentaries will be released in theaters around the country or get programmed on public or cable TV channels, but most documentary filmmakers will start by submitting their work to film festivals, in hopes of attracting distributors for the theater and television markets. Filmmakers may also make their films available online and use social media to reach their target audience.



## SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES

### The Film's Website:

<http://www.thereturnproject.com/>

The Three Strikes Project Website: <https://law.stanford.edu/stanford-justice-advocacy-project/>

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### Against Mass Incarceration:

The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration by Ta-Nehisi Coates: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/10/the-black-family-in-the-age-of-mass-incarceration/403246/>

The ACLU topic page on mass incarceration: <https://www.aclu.org/issues/mass-incarceration>

The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness, by Michelle Alexander: <http://newjimcrow.com/>  
 History is a Weapon: The Challenge of Prison Abolition: A Conversation: <http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/davisinterview.html>

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### Resources for Discussing Criminal Justice in the Classroom:

Teaching Tolerance: Teacher's Guide for The New Jim Crow: <http://www.tolerance.org/supplement/introduction-teacher-s-guide>

NY Times Learning Blog: Justice for All? Teaching About Crime and Punishment in America: [http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/10/justice-for-all-teaching-about-crime-and-punishment-in-america/?\\_r=0](http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/10/justice-for-all-teaching-about-crime-and-punishment-in-america/?_r=0)

ITVS Community Classroom: Women and Girls in the Criminal Justice System: <http://cdn.itvs.org/gcjs-educator-guide.pdf>

Law and Justice Foundations Curriculum: [http://lawandjustice.edc.org/sites/lawandjustice.edc.org/files/Teaching\\_the\\_Law\\_and\\_Justice\\_Curriculum.pdf](http://lawandjustice.edc.org/sites/lawandjustice.edc.org/files/Teaching_the_Law_and_Justice_Curriculum.pdf)



## REVIEWS

### Moveable Fest

TRIBECA '16 INTERVIEW: BILAL CHATMAN, KELLY DUANE DE LA VEGA & KATIE GALLOWAY ON MAKING THE BREAK FROM PRISON IN "THE RETURN" On getting inside the complex experience of life on the outside for ex-cons.

byStephen Saito

After the twistiness of their last feature documentary "Better This World," which followed two men from Midland, Texas as they became ensnared by the FBI and labeled as terrorists after their activist efforts drew the government's attention, that the directing duo of Kelly Duane De La Vega and Katie Galloway left no doubt they want audiences to take a second look to what they're seeing. So it is no surprise that their latest, "The Return" allows for a long, hard look at two recent parolees – Kenneth Anderson and Bilal Chatman – in California, who receive an unexpected release from prison after voters passed Proposition 36 in 2012, repealing the state's harsh "three strikes" law that put serial offenders behind bars for life, often for non-violent crimes.

Duane De La Vega and Galloway follow the two as they readjust to civilian life, not made easy by either their time away, which in Anderson's case means a family that's grown up without him, or the fact they still must constantly report back to their parole officers, giving the sense that the outside world will never feel much bigger than their cell. Through the year the filmmakers spend with the two, weaving in other stories of cases that are being pursued by the Justice Advocacy Project at Stanford run by Michael Romano, "The Return" shows a system whether by intent or not that appears designed to make it impossible to rejoin society as an equal with

plenty of bureaucracy but no infrastructure to help those who truly want to pursue a path on the straight and narrow. Shortly after the film's premiere at the Tribeca Film Festival where it claimed the Audience Award for Best Documentary, the two filmmakers as well as Chatman, who has since gone on to become an outspoken (and well-adjusted) advocate for ex-prisoners, talked about how they got inside the experience of life on the outside, finding their subjects and inadvertently discovering how their films are not only helping other causes, but their own as filmmakers as well.

How did this come about?

Kelly Duane De La Vega: Both Katie and I have been working in the criminal justice space for a very long time and Michael Romano, who is the main subject in the film, told us that they were going to put Prop. 36 on the ballot, and we decided to do a series of short format pieces profiling nonviolent offenders serving life [sentences]. They ran in Mother Jones and also in the New York Times. [Prop. 36] passed in every county in California – 70% of Californians voted in favor. Even the most conservative counties voted to pass it.

We were so excited because it was really the first big criminal justice reform since we've been scaling that mass incarceration for the last 30 to 40 years, so we wanted to see what reform would look like and how as the society, where we needed to improve [the reintegration process]. We have really strong connections with people on the inside and also people on the outside, so it seemed like a great opportunity to look at reform from the institutions, the prison, the court rooms, and also the individual level.

Because of those connections you've made over the



years, do you feel like this is a film you've only could've made now?

Kelly De La Vega: We have a lot of credibility in the space and there is a lot of trust, because of our long-term commitment. Both of our fathers were also civil rights attorneys – mine was a criminal defense attorney – and we have a lifetime connection to the community, but in some ways, we could only do it now because it's the beginning of reform; reform didn't exist really prior to that. California led the nation in [the establishment] of draconian sentencing, then New York with the Rockefeller laws. We hope that California is now going to lead the nation in the opposite direction.

Katie Galloway: Some reforms existed, but this was the first time that voters have ever scaled back sentences [of people who] are currently incarcerated. [This moment is] also seen by most people in the space as the first time that there is real potential for a meaningful shift to criminal justice policy, which doesn't mean it's going to happen. A lot of people are dubious about what will actually happen – people who work in the space have seen 40 years of escalating mass incarceration and not a lot of public or political will for changing policies in any major way, but now a lot of people, including us, are very committed to pushing on the change moment to seeing where it can go.

How did Bilal and Kenneth become the two parolees you followed?

Kelly Duane De La Vega: We filmed with a lot of different people, and from our perspective, Bilal, Kenneth and also the Anderson family – [Ken's wife] Monica and [his daughter] Kaylica are really the focus in part because they were the people we connected most deeply with, and in part that it was their stories we believed would

resonate as authentic and representative to those who have loved ones that have been incarcerated, or have been incarcerated, and would resonate beyond that community to people who have not been touched by the criminal justice system because of the beauty of who they are and the depth of the connection that they have with the families.

Much of their story touches on universal desires – the desire to connect with your children, to connect with your mother, to find your way in life and the human need for that. We wanted to very much lift up the voices of people whose voices are just not really heard or understood and we felt there couldn't be better people to do that by shedding light on their journeys.

Katie Galloway: I'll add the story of mass incarceration in America is largely a story of people of color and people who are not of means. We felt in terms of African-American male being so overrepresented in the prison population, and the more harsh the sentences are – nearly half of the "three strikes" population is African-American while they're only 11% of the population – it was really significant and felt like it should be represented in the film.

It is also a story of addiction and mental health issues. There was addiction in both cases, [it's a part of] a hugely disproportionate number of cases. Kenneth also struggled with mental health issues, which may or may not have preceded his time in prison, but definitely were present. It was also important for us to have a family as a character to see someone – [showing how] a family would have been interrupted not just in terms of the housing and jobs, but emotional and psychological development, [with] four young kids left behind, and what was it like to try to reintegrate. We followed a lot of cases, and we anticipated that there would be more



of a struggle in Kenneth's story because of some of the issues he was dealing with and how prison had affected him.

With Bilal, there was just a man on a mission, and we weren't sure what was going to happen because there are so many barriers to success, but we really believed that from the day one when we saw him coming out of prison, he was going to stop at nothing to find success. It was also to represent the people inside who could be a model for people to come out through his actions. He's always been committed to helping create more pathways for those who are inside.

For Bilal, was this an easy decision for you to let the cameras in?

Bilal Chatman: Absolutely not. First, it was strictly survival, I wanted to put the judge, the [District Attorney] and everybody on blast. The law changed, but written into the law was the opportunity for the judge to make a decision whether or not they were going to let you out or not. Some people were immediately released, and I was considered a contested hearing, so I had to go prove to the court why I was not still a detriment to society. Part of that was me [getting] history on the job, but first you had to be eligible. Your last strike had to be non-violent or non-service, then after that, the judge had the opportunity to look at your case, look what's going on and then say, "Hey, I want to look at him more."

My attorney knew [Katie and Kelly], and I was so blessed to have them with me [because] I was excited about the fact that I was eligible and I had done some good things in prison, I was disciplinary-free, and I wanted all that to go in to the court room. I expected [the judge] to tell me,

"No, you are not going to be let out," and I wanted the world to see how bad the system is.

One of the best moments in the film, though certainly it must not have felt like it at the time, is when your parole officer is insisting you report when you're on your way to work, showing the vicious cycle of how you're prevented from being a productive member of society by the same system that's evaluating whether you are. Was that important to you to have in the film?

Bilal Chatman: Yeah, of course everybody wants to be looked at in good light, but I wanted them to see some of the struggles. The probation officer was a straight menace. He was completely in the way, and I felt as a former inmate and a person that was out on probation and given this opportunity, I did all the things that he needed from me. I needed to see him once a month, which I did. I needed to have gainful employment, which I did. I needed to have a stable residence, which I did; I needed to have identification all the time, which I did and I needed to have transportation, [which is] how you are going to get to and from these offices, and I did. I had no problem with that, the problem is he wanted to see me during my work hours and I didn't want to lose any work hours.

I wanted the world to see that these are some of the pitfalls that come out for us. I did my time, the court [and] everybody said I was good to go, so why am I still struggling and battling? So I called the film team. I called people where I was working, I called my attorney, and we all went down there. What's the problem here [I asked the parole officer], why can't this guy come in a little later, or come in earlier? Why are you trying to take away my job, which is part of my conditions – to have gainful employment? That was part of the issues



that I have with them.

Beyond your central stories, you also include Shane, another recent parolee, and the story of Lester Wallace, whose case you revisit from time to time as it comes up before a judge. How did those come into the picture?

Kelly Duane De La Vega: Very early on, we were thinking about the film cinematically, like how do you weave together the story? We tend to tell our stories close to the bone, [to] really get people emotionally connected to our characters, illuminating the larger political issue. We knew we wanted to do a collection of short stories, representing more than just one returning citizen and their family. We wanted to show what this looks like in the courtrooms and [to have] the voice of the judge in there. Katie mentioned that our two central characters are African-American because those are the people who are most affected, but the poor white rural community is also very much affected by these draconian sentencing laws, so we wanted to take people into a diverse set of environments and actually spent a lot of time with Shane, who for complicated reasons did not playing a larger role in the film.


We also wanted to show Mike [Romano] and Susan [Champion] as a form of inspiration, and show the hard work that really goes in to trying to create change and to represent people who have so little. With Lester Wallace, I think he embodies this really important part that prison population, the half that has been diagnosed with some form of mental illness. Almost everybody is in prison because of a drug-related crime, whether it was inspired by addiction or has to do with selling drugs. Lester Wallace had both of those – he was a homeless drug addict who tried to steal a car radio, and has been inside of prison for 20 years.

Katie Galloway: He has this connection with Mike [Romano] in a way [because] the case that moved Mike and brings out his humanity, which was important. Mike and Susan are at the center of the story, but they are also the voice of the meta story about people who have never had a chance [and how] for decades our solution as a nation was to just incarcerate the mentally ill, the addicted and the poor. That was the case for Lester – he was arrested at 9 am the day that the three strikes law got signed and the more you find out about his story, the more painful it is. He got disciplinary write-ups, because he was 5' 2" and his pants were too long, so he rolled them up and that's not allowed. That kind of thing is just maddening. For reasons that we can't fully go into in the film, Susan and Mike were very emotionally bound up with him, and his being released was crucially important to them.

Kelly brings up the cinematic quality of this. Is it hard to find those moments in something that so obviously prizes a fly-on-the-wall quality? You do have that great scene Kenneth is in a room at home and you can hear the prison sounds.

Kelly Duane De La Vega: We struggled with that very question. We felt like how do you get into what it feels like to be struggling with the legacy of, in Ken's case, the pain and mental struggles in prison? We did flashbacks originally and they didn't feel right. Ultimately, we thought the sound design was able to allow us to examine that, the fact that prison was with him no matter where he was in many ways and he was having a hard time separating.

As you show, readjusting to life after prison is already difficult. Was it a concern you're adding another layer on top of it with a camera crew?



Katie Galloway: As documentary filmmakers, that's always something that you have to be sensitive to. Nobody pretends in journalism anymore that you are getting objective truth, whether you are there with the paper and pen or a whole camera crew. It's another reason why it's super-important to us to spend a lot of time with [our subjects] – having people get to know you and forget you are there somewhat – to get as close to their authentic experience as possible. I remember just dropping in Shane's family's life, and we had one hour, which is what we were allowed, and trying to really connect and get people to forget about the cameras, which is almost impossible. The most important audience for us are the people in the film. When all of our main characters – Kenneth, [Kenneth's wife] Monica, [his daughter] Kaylica, [and his son] Sam and Bilal – said essentially, "You got it. It feels authentic to my experience," that feels incredible, like that's the true test.

Kelly Duane De La Vega: We spent an afternoon with the Anderson family without cameras, and told them what we wanted to do, what our goals were and what an imposition it would probably be as weeks and months went on. They took a month as a family to decide whether they wanted to do it. Monica came back and said that something like this could have really helped her, and she wants to help other families, so even when it was difficult for them, she had a larger calling that was personal. She knew she was doing something for the larger community.

Katie Galloway: Interestingly, and this may be one of the perks of having been in it for a long time, the family had seen our earlier work and it wasn't as a result of our sending it. By chance, I think maybe the youngest in the family who might have been the most resistant had seen our earlier work and said, "I believed in the way you told that story." Whether you are sharing it with them directly,

or people happen to have come across it, it's pretty exciting to hear when people have been exposed [to your work].