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A SMALL ACT

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A SMALL ACT

Directed by Jennifer Arnold

USA | 2010 | 85 min

TEACHER'S GUIDE

This guide has been designed to help teachers and students enrich their experience of documentary film by providing support in the form of questions and activities. There are a range of questions that will help teachers frame discussions with their classes, activities for before, during and after viewing the film, and some web links that provide starting points for further research or discussion. In separate packages, there will also be support materials available with information regarding general viewing and teaching principles for documentary film and the fundamental aspects of making documentary films.

The Film

When Hilde Back sponsored a young, impoverished Kenyan student, she thought nothing of it. She paid roughly \$15 per term to keep him in primary school. She certainly never expected to hear from him. But many years later, she does. Chris Mburu has been thinking of his "angel" Hilde since he was a boy. The small contribution she made paid off—Chris went all the way to Harvard. Now, he's a respected United Nations human rights lawyer, dedicating his life to battling genocide and crimes against humanity. Chris decides to replicate Hilde's generosity by starting his own scholarship fund, and he names it after her. This scholarship will educate bright kids in his village so they can also succeed and give back. But Chris is stunned when Kenya's public schools start failing, and only two new students qualify for sponsorship. Simultaneously, Kenya falls into ethnic-based election violence. After working on conflicts in neighbouring countries, Chris knows that ignorance fuels ethnic hatred. Education has never been more important. Chris must decide what to do.

The Filmmaker

Director/producer Jennifer Arnold graduated from UCLA and University of Nairobi with a BA in African history and returned to UCLA for an MFA in film. Her award-winning film *Maid of Honor* screened at Sundance before airing on HBO/Cinemax and Film 4. Arnold returned to Sundance with her Internet series, *The Mullet Chronicles*, which was developed into the documentary, *American Mullet*, released by Palm Pictures and Lionsgate. Arnold 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.

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Facts on Kenya

After independence from Britain in 1963, politics was dominated by the charismatic Jomo Kenyatta. He was succeeded in 1978 by Daniel arap Moi, who remained in power for 24 years. The ruling Kenya African National Union, Kanu, was the only legal political party for much of the 1980s. Violent unrest—and international pressure—led to the restoration of multi-party politics in the early 1990s. But it was to be another decade before opposition candidate Mwai Kibaki ended nearly 40 years of Kanu rule with his landslide victory in 2002's general election.

Despite President Kibaki's pledge to tackle corruption, some donors estimated that up to \$1 billion had been lost to graft between 2002 and 2005. Other pressing challenges include high unemployment, crime and poverty; most Kenyans live below the poverty level of \$1 a day. Droughts frequently put millions of people at risk. Kenya has been a leading light in the Somali and Sudanese peace processes. With its scenic beauty and abundant wildlife, Kenya is one of Africa's major safari destinations. The lucrative tourist industry has bounced back following the slump that followed bomb attacks in Nairobi in 1998 and Mombasa in 2002. And in 2006 tourism was the country's best hard currency earner, ahead of horticulture and tea.

Source: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/country_profiles/1024563.stm

VIEWING THE FILM WITH STUDENTS

There are important themes in this film that have broad implications for students and their futures. Take time to activate your students' background understanding of these themes before viewing. This will help them as they come to their own understanding and develop their critical abilities.

The following three subsections, on this page, are intended to provide you with a range of pre-viewing, viewing and post-viewing activities. They are followed by a set of questions based upon the film's larger thematic domains, some follow-up questions and quotations, sample curricular outcomes, and a page of web links for further investigation.

Pre-Viewing Activities

Show students the teaser for the film (<http://www.asmallact.com/index.html>). Have students work in small groups to try and identify themes or ideas conveyed by the trailer.

Discuss with students how effective/affective the trailer is as a media piece.

Have students list the following headers on a piece of paper in the form of a T-chart: Essential, Desirable and Highly Desirable. Under each heading, student need to list between three and four items from their lifestyle. Included in this could be education, wealth, housing, clothing, air conditioning, heat, running water, transportation links, cell phone, computer, Internet, etc. They will then need to rank them according to importance (With one being most important, 10 being least important). Ask the class what a Kenyan's chart might look like? Have volunteers share in a class discussion.

For homework, have students read one of the articles referenced in the web links on page seven.

Print several of the questions or quotations from page five on individual sheets of paper. Have students work in small groups or with partners to discuss if they agree with the ideas. Have them share the statement and what they think or believe about it with the class.

Set a purpose for viewing by having a discussion about one or more of the questions or quotations on page five.

Viewing Activities

Have students take notes on, or jot down connections to, one of the thematic domains on page four of this guide. Ask students to find proof from the film that supports their connections.

Have students use a graphic organizer to summarize the film as they watch it. There are three students in the film: Kimani, Ruth and Caroline, as well as Chris and Hilde, who are part of the Hilde Back Education Fund.

Stop the film at various points and have students provide summaries at each point.

Have students jot down five ideas for discussion, or questions that the film raised in their minds.

Post-Viewing Activities

Show the students their quotations from the pre-viewing activity and see if their minds were changed or opinions altered or enhanced by the film.

Have students revisit the charts of the important things in their life. After watching the film, would they change the order of any of the items listed? Discuss.

Have student complete an exit note (single small sheet of paper with one phrase or idea written on it) that demonstrates one thing they have learned, felt or decided as a result of watching the film.

Discuss with students their initial reactions to the various characters and situations confronted in the film. Did it change by the end of the film? Why?

Students will act as members of the Hilde Back Education Fund and decide if a child should receive funding or have to wait a year. Assume all the children have met the 380 minimum score from their KCPE test. Have students work in groups of three. Each group will be assigned three children from the World Vision website (<https://children.worldvision.ca/Sponsorship/Forms/Child.aspx?service=page%2fChild&lang=en&mc=3335304>) that will be printed out (each group could have children from different countries). On large chart paper, each group will list each child and identify each child's characteristics/problems they need to overcome. Students will then present to the class how they decided which one of the three would be chosen. They will need to include their criteria and why the two children were not chosen. After the exercise, discuss how the class felt making these decisions. Did they feel angry or sad? Did they do anything to detach themselves, to feel less guilty for choosing one child over another?

For further ideas around how to explore this documentary, use the guiding questions on page four.

THE BIG QUESTIONS/IDEAS/THEMES

Multiple Perspectives

What is the subject of this film? Can you determine the filmmakers' perspective on this subject? What evidence can you find in the film to support your view?

How does this film help you analyze and interpret points of view about issues that concern people?

Does the filmmakers' perspective foster respect for diversity and an inclusive society? If so, how?

Identity

Whose story is told in this documentary? Whose story is not told? How does this story, and the way it is told, help you understand your own community/life?

How do the people in this film identify with their community? What are the common bonds among the people in this film? What challenges do they face in expressing their identity?

What film techniques do the filmmakers use to convey the identity of the people in this film?

Citizenship

What insights does this documentary offer about the ideals of good citizenship in the community depicted in this film?

How does the film deal with issues of freedom, equality, human dignity, and individual and collective rights and responsibilities?

Change and Continuity

How does this film help you understand a community's values and its attitudes towards an issue at a particular time?

What changes do the people in the film experience? What causes those changes? What are the consequences of those changes for the people in the documentary?

Culture and Community

Which aspects of a people's culture does this film focus on? Why do you think the filmmakers focused on those aspects?

How do the images, themes and message of this film help you understand the filmmakers' attitude towards the subject? What do you think might have been the intended audience's attitude towards the documentary subject?

Individuals, Societies and Economic Decisions

What economic systems are at work in this film? What are some of the causes and effects of the economic decisions made by the people in the film's community?

Does money play a part in the decisions being made in the film and what does it tell you about their local culture?

Power and Governance

What system of government control do we see in this documentary? How is power distributed within this society? What are the implications of that distribution on issues affecting the people's well-being and freedom?

Global Connections

What global issues are addressed in this film? What is the filmmakers' point of view on the opportunities and challenges of those issues?

Adapted from NFB Documentary Lens: <http://www.nfb.ca>

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Additional Questions for Pre- or Post-Viewing Activities

How do the three stories about the of the children make you feel? Why do you think the filmmaker chose these three individuals?

Why is it important to care about other countries and other cultures?

Do people have a right to a free education? Explain.

Not-for-profit organizations like the Hilde Back Education Fund help support developing countries and sponsor children's education. Find two other groups that have similar agendas and summarize your findings for both.

Do you think the KCPE aptitude test is a fair representation of a student's abilities? What would be a fair test of someone's knowledge if an alternative was necessary? What other characteristics should be considered?

If you were part of the selection committee, how would you decide who receives a scholarship if no one met the 380 minimum score? Would you choose differently than they did in the film?

Analogies can be useful to explain an issue. A good deed is described as spreading in circles like rings on the water. Use your own analogy to describe the same issue.

Quotations from the Film to Explore

"A drop in the ocean."

"No matter what your life is like, you can still succeed."

"The world doesn't always revolve around Western concepts."

"Education is a life and death issue, because when people are not educated, they can be exploited for political means. That is how we get violence and conflict."

"Everyone has a major role in making the world a better place. It is not for leaders, not for others, it is so much for each and every one of us as a human being."

Other Quotations to Explore

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Margaret Mead

"How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world." Anne Frank

"We can do no great things, only small things with great love." Mother Teresa

"It is the greatest of all mistakes to do nothing because you can only do little—do what you can." Sydney Smith

"If you can't feed a hundred people, then feed just one." Mother Teresa

"The first question which the priest and the Levite asked was: 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?' But... the good Samaritan reversed the question: 'If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?'" Martin Luther King Jr.

EXAMPLES OF CURRICULUM EXPECTATIONS

COURSE	OVERALL EXPECTATIONS
Grade 10 Civics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explain what it means to be a “global citizen” and why it is important to be one.
Grade 11 Family Studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • evaluate various global influences on children and families. • analyze how families are affected by global disparities in wealth and resources.
Grade 12 Family Studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • analyze current issues and trends relevant to individual development, and speculate on future directions.
Grade 12 Philosophy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • demonstrate an understanding of the main questions, concepts and theories of social and political philosophy.
Grade 12 Politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explain the rights and responsibilities of individual citizens, groups and states in the international community. • compare the aspirations, expectations and life conditions of people in developed and developing nations.
Grade 12 Geography	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • compare the cultural, economic and political aspirations of selected groups and the effects of their actions on local, national and global geographic issues. • evaluate the effectiveness of short-term and long-term solutions to geographic problems and issues at the local, national and global level. • evaluate the effectiveness of international organizations in strengthening the links among world peoples.

WEBSITES AND ONLINE RESOURCES

About the Film

The official website for *A Small Act* has a trailer, information about the filmmakers, the students, Hilde and Chris, Kenyan unrest, press info and other events.

<http://www.asmallact.com>

About the Filmmakers

On the official website is a tab to information about the director, producers, editors and composers of the film.

<http://www.asmallact.com/page0/page0.html>

About the Hilde Back Education Fund

The Hilde Back Education Fund, (HBEF) is a charitable community-based organization that assists children from poor families in completing primary and secondary school education in Githunguri, Kenya.

<http://www.hildebackeducationfund.com>

Online Articles

New Internationalist: An online magazine that reports on issues of world poverty and inequality, and debates and campaigns for radical change. It contains leftwing and very opinionated pieces which can be biased, but serve a purpose. A special feature in the January 2008 issue, "Let Us Not Find Revolutionaries Where There Are None," contains great information about the history of the political unrest in Kenya. Good reading for homework and discussion.

<http://www.newint.org/features/special/2008/01/11/kenya/>

Human Rights Watch: Human Rights Watch is a non-profit, nongovernmental human rights organization dedicated to protecting the human rights of people around the world. It works to prevent discrimination, uphold political freedom, protect people from inhumane conduct in wartime and bring offenders to justice. They challenge governments and those who hold power to end abusive practices and respect. Several articles about Kenya can be printed and used for homework readings.

<http://www.hrw.org/en/africa/kenya>

On the Take Part website, the article "Investing in Education: A Small Act Has Big Impact" includes an interview with the director Jennifer Arnold, as well as links to the trailer and a 15-minute clip from the film.

<http://www.takepart.com/news/2009/10/12/investing-in-education-a-small-act-has-big-impact/>

Nongovernmental Organizations

Free the Children: From one boy's story of courage to a global movement, Free the Children shows that children have the power to change the world. Through leadership training at home and community development projects abroad, Free the Children empowers youth everywhere to make a difference. Teachers and students can build schools around the world, including in Kenya.

<http://www.freethechildren.com/whatwedo/international/aav/education/>

World Vision: World Vision is a Christian relief, development and advocacy organization dedicated to working with children, families and communities to overcome poverty and injustice. As followers of Jesus, they are motivated by God's love for all people regardless of race, religion, gender or ethnicity. There are more than 1,400 children listed on their website waiting to be sponsored. This link is used in a post-viewing activity.

<https://children.worldvision.ca/Sponsorship/Forms/Child.aspx?service=page%2fChild&lang=en&mc=3335304>

Various Links for Lesson Plan Ideas, Media Awareness, Critical Literacy and Documentary Films

The Association for Media Literacy: This Canadian website examines how media impacts and influences culture.

<http://www.aml.ca/home>

Using Documentaries in the Classroom: This teacher librarian's personal website contains excellent resources for teaching with documentary films.

http://www.frankwbaker.com/using_docs_in_the_classroom.htm

Media Awareness: A Canadian non-profit media education and Internet-literacy resource library.

<http://www.media-awareness.ca>

Center for Media Literacy: A U.S. website which provides several resources for making, understanding and criticizing media.

<http://www.medialit.org>

The National Film Board of Canada website: On this site is an area with teaching resources and short documentary films that can be used as teaching aides.

<http://www.nfb.ca>

Hot Docs Looking at Documentaries: A teaching guide that sets out questions designed to help teachers include the study of documentary film in their curriculum.

http://www.hotdocs.ca/youth/docs_for_schools/2010_docs_for_schools_selections/