



**KALIEF BROWDER: A LESSON PLAN**



One night, when Kalief Browder was just a 16-year old kid, he walked home from a party in The Bronx, and two policemen arrested him for stealing a backpack. None of the stolen items were ever found on him. He was never found guilty. Indeed, his case never even went to trial. The charges against him were eventually dropped, but all his future prospects, his life's course – indeed, his life itself - were destroyed that night. Charged with a crime he maintained he did not commit, caught in a criminal justice system that denied him the right to a fair and speedy trial, Kalief spent over 1,000 days on Rikers Island. For about 800 of those days he remained in solitary confinement. While his school friends passed notes in English class, Kalief learned to wash his own clothes with bar soap and a bucket. While his friends giggled about prom, Kalief was beaten by inmates - and officers. While his friends planned parties for graduation day fun, Kalief tore bed sheets to make a noose that would fit around his own neck. Kalief failed to successfully commit suicide during the time of his incarceration. He was 20 years old when he was released, and in all those years, despite court appearances where he was offered his freedom in return for a guilty plea, Kalief refused to confess to a crime he did not commit. When his case was finally dismissed, he walked back into the world, took a bus, and rode two subways home.

Kalief earned his GED, obtained a job, attended weekly counseling sessions, and enrolled in Bronx Community College, where he earned a 3.6 grade point average. He appeared on *The View* and met Jay Z. But none of those accomplishments liberated him from the trauma of prison life and the child abuse he experienced while on Rikers. Exoneration, reunion with family, even a lawsuit against the

system that caged him couldn't undo the damage done inside.

In an article for the *New Yorker*, Kalief said, "People tell me because I have this case against the city I'm all right. But I'm not all right. I'm messed up. I know that I might see some money from this case, but that's not going to help me mentally. I'm mentally scarred right now. That's how I feel. Because there are certain things that changed about me and they might not go back."

After at least one unsuccessful suicide attempt following his release, Kalief killed himself. His mother found him hanging outside a second floor bedroom of their Bronx home.

Kalief's story added renewed fervor to the Movement for Black Lives. Jay Z produced a two part documentary series about Kalief that aired on Spike TV. His story became an anthem for prison reform advocates. Two lawsuits remained in place against the city. But none of that eased his family's pain. Sixteen months after her youngest child took his own life, Kalief's mother Venida also passed away, her own heart broken by the unfair burdens placed on her son.

These lesson plans will never make sense of it all, but they can give young learners the tools they need to become more thoughtful and purposeful in their interrogation of the criminal justice system that denied Kalief Browder his human and legal rights.

by Eisa Nefertari Ulen

# Getting the Facts

## Topics for Discussion

1. What are your general opinions about incarcerated persons?
2. What type of person do you think of when you hear someone has spent time in jail?
3. What are your opinions about corrections officers?
4. What type of person do you think of when you hear someone has worked as a corrections officer?
5. What facts, if any, do you know about incarcerated persons? What facts do you know about corrections officers?
6. What do you know about the rates of incarcerated youth in this country?
7. Is it your opinion that 16-year olds be locked away even before they have been convicted of a crime?
8. Is it your opinion that 16-year olds be locked away even after they have been convicted of a crime?
9. What other forms of punishment and monitoring of children awaiting trial might be possible?
10. What other forms of punishment of children found guilty of punishable crimes might be possible?
11. Is something other than punishment possible?

## Focused Discussion

Read this *New Yorker* magazine article:

<http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/kalief-browder-1993-2015>

1. A fact is an indisputably true assertion that can be objectively supported. What are the facts regarding the Kalief Browder story as presented in this article?
2. What are some details that confirm to the reader that the journalist is using objective facts to report on the Ka-

lief Browder story?

3. An opinion is a view or judgment about something and can be subjective. What are the opinions in this article?
4. What language does the journalist use to indicate to the reader that she is providing an opinion?
5. Which are stronger in this article, the facts or the opinions?
6. Have any of your opinions about incarcerated persons, corrections officers, and the way youth are treated in the criminal justice system changed now that you've learned the facts of the Kalief Browder case?

## Essay Idea

Write your own article about Kalief Browder using facts you research about this tragedy. In your article provide a few opinions on the case, but be sure to use language that lets the reader know you are providing a subjective opinion in those sentences. Remember, your article has to be informational, so be sure to provide more facts than opinions.

## Additional Activities

1. Kalief Browder was arrested for allegedly stealing a backpack. Use the backpack theme to create a visual expression of your opinion regarding the Kalief Browder story. You might want to think about the emotions this story unpacks for you. You might want to consider the things you wish society could just pack away forever like police profiling, anti-Black racism, and fear. Maybe these social problems, like the problem of incarcerated children, are things you think America needs to unpack and deal with in a meaningful way. Use a backpack drawing, collage, photograph, advertisement, or sketch to express

the emotional responses and thoughts you have when you consider the Kalief Browder story.

2. Using the facts of the case, stage a mock trial of the Kalief Browder case. Identify a student to play each part, including the judge, jury, prosecutor, and defense attorney. Someone should also play the police who arrested Kalief, the friend he was walking with that night, the man who said Kalief robbed him, and of course Kalief himself. Give Kalief the trial he never got from the criminal justice system.

### **13th**

#### **Topics for Discussion**

1. What do you know about slavery?
2. What is the difference between the term slave and the term enslaved African? Which term emphasizes the humanity of the person in bondage?
3. What is the difference between the term prisoner and the term incarcerated person?
4. Have you ever heard the term prison industrial complex?
5. What was the motive behind slavery? What did slave-owners want to make?
6. What is the motive behind private prisons? What do the people who own prisons want to make?
7. Do you think there is a relationship between the slave system of the past and the prison system of today?

#### **Essay Questions**

Watch the Ava DuVernay film, *13th*, on Netflix. Once the film ends, simply pick up your pen and begin writing. Write whatever comes out of you without holding back, or editing, or reconsidering what you put down on

paper. Write for at least 15 minutes, in silence, without stopping.

#### **Additional Activities**

1. DuVernay uses simple but striking visuals to show the increase in incarcerated persons in the United States. Use the numbers she provides to make a graph or a chart that documents the growth of the prison population in this country.
2. Research prison populations around the world. Choose two countries on each continent (and include Australia) and make a graph or a chart that documents the numbers of incarcerated people globally. Be sure to use numbers for the same year for each country you select. Include the same year numbers for the United States on your chart or graph.
3. Rewind the DuVernay documentary to the section on ALEC. Did you know about ALEC before watching this film? Do you think many Americans know about ALEC? Do you think all Americans should know about ALEC? As a class, decide how you feel about this organization and its influence on public policy. Write an open letter addressed to the American people that lists the important facts about ALEC, what it does, and who it influences. You may want to emphasize the Trayvon Martin case, Stand Your Ground, and Wal Mart in this letter. Make sure your open letter sticks to the facts as provided in DuVernay's film. Post your open letter online.
4. Read the Emancipation Proclamation: <http://www.historynet.com/emancipation-proclamation-text>. Write your own Emancipation Proclamation for persons who are wrongfully incarcerated. You may wish to write an Emancipation Proclamation or all incarcerated persons under the age of 21.

## **Restorative Justice**

### **Topics for Discussion**

1. What does the word restore mean?
2. What is justice?
3. What might the term Restorative Justice mean?
4. What does punitive mean?
5. Pretend you are responsible for managing children who have committed crimes. What kind of space would you want those children to live in after the crimes are committed? Would you place them in a space that looks more like a prison, or would you want them in a place that looks more like a home? Would your intention be to punish them or to rehabilitate them? What might be the best ways to help prevent future crimes from happening?
6. What do you think the school to prison pipeline is?

### **Essay Question**

Read this article about Restorative Justice, or RJ:  
<http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/34203-restorative-justice-gives-our-children-dignity-in-us-schools>

Research RJ on this website:

<http://restorativejustice.org/>

Imagine what a system that utilized RJ, instead of punitive discipline, might have done for Kalief Browder during the 1,000 day period of his incarceration. How might the outcome of his experience have been different? How might other incarcerated children and the corrections officers have been different if RJ was the strategy in place on Rikers Island? Given the fact that he went to school, obtained a job, and went to weekly counseling sessions, do you think Kalief might have been able to exit Rikers and continue to live a productive life if he was incarcerated in a facility that sought to restore him rather than punish him? Write an essay that imagines Kalief's life in

and out of prison if he had done the same time – but in a different kind of place.

### **Additional Activities**

1. Research your own school's discipline policy and the online policies of other schools around the country. In a small group, talk about the expectations of young people in U.S. schools.

2. Read this Tavis Smiley Report on the school to prison pipeline: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/tavissmiley/tsr/education-under-arrest/school-to-prison-pipeline-fact-sheet/> Make your own fact sheet about this pipeline and post it in your school.

3. View this infographic on the American Civil Liberties Union website: <https://www.aclu.org/infographic/school-prison-pipeline-infographic>

Read this interview with Fania Davis about RJOY:

<https://zcomm.org/znetarticle/no-word-for-prison-by-eisa-nefertari-ulen/>

Using facts from the Davis interview, create your own infographic about RJOY.

4. Write a letter to your local Board of Education informing them about the school to prison pipeline and the alternative to punitive discipline in schools that RJOY offers. In your letter, persuade school officials that resources used to bring officers into schools might be better used to bring RJOY programs into schools. Use facts to support your ideas and give your letter validity. Send your letter to your local Board of Education.

### **The Prison of the Mind**

Suicide prevention requires professional support. Here are some links to resources educators might find helpful: Suicide Prevention Resource Center

<http://www.sprc.org/settings/schools>

US Department of Health and Human Services  
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, <https://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content/SMA12-4669/SMA12-4669.pdf>

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention  
<https://afsp.org/our-work/education/model-school-policy-suicide-prevention/>

### **The New Abolitionists Focused Discussion**

View this interview with Angela Davis:

[https://www.democracynow.org/2014/3/6/angela\\_davis\\_on\\_prison\\_abolition\\_the](https://www.democracynow.org/2014/3/6/angela_davis_on_prison_abolition_the)

1. What do you think Davis means by decarceration? How is that term different from incarceration?
2. Are you surprised by the number of people Davis says are incarcerated in the prison industrial complex?
3. What do you think of the term prison industrial complex?
4. What is industry? What are the connotations associated with the word industrial? Do those words suggest a place suitable for humans?
5. What is a complex? What does it mean when something is complex? How does this word, both the noun form and the adjective, relate to Kalief's experience?
6. Think about the word abolition. What other movement for social justice is associated with that term?
7. Do you think a word associated with the emancipation of slaves makes sense when talking about the prison industrial complex? In what way(s) is being enslaved similar to being incarcerated? In what way(s) are those two

experiences different?

### **Essay Question**

Read through the table of contents in the essay collection *Who Do You Serve? Who Do You Protect?* (Haymarket Books 2016), and choose one that interests you. After you read the essay you select, list the facts you learned. Next look over the facts you listed. Can they be organized into categories or groups? After you've organized your facts, write a magazine article about the topic of your study as it relates to the Kalief Browder story. Make sure your magazine article is informational. It should contain facts that inform the reader.

### **Additional Activities**

1. When the whole class has finished writing their articles, put them together to make a magazine. What should the title of your magazine be? Work on a powerful cover with bold art to draw attention to your magazine. What kinds of advertisements would be appropriate for your publication? Imagine ads that might run in an informational magazine like yours and include them between each article.
2. Read this essay by Angela Davis: <http://www.history-isaweapon.com/defcon1/davisprison.html>  
It contains many words that may be unfamiliar to you. Develop a reading guide to help younger students read this essay. List vocabulary words and their definitions in your reading guide. In addition, create a fact sheet to help younger readers understand this essay and the social issues it addresses.
3. Research Angela Davis, including her childhood, her education, and her involvement in the Struggle for

Black Liberation in the 1960s and 1970s. Focus your research on her experience as a political prisoner and her decades-long work on behalf of the incarcerated in America. Create a vivid infographic using pictures and words to help others understand Davis' commitment to abolition of incarcerated persons.

4. Read the online definitions of the prison industrial complex and abolition on the Critical Resistance website. This is an organization Angela Davis cofounded. Create a sketch, painting, collage, or other artistic rendering to express your feelings about prison abolition and Kalief Browder. Incorporate the Critical Resistance definitions in your work.

5. The Prison Abolition Movement is very similar in name to the Abolitionist Movement to end slavery. Using a large poster board, write Abolitionist Movement on the top of one side of the paper and write Prison Abolition Movement on the top of the other side. Draw a line underneath these terms and list the facts about each movement to make a historical chart. For example, you might write "Movement to free enslaved African people" under Abolitionist Movement and then write "Movement to free incarcerated people" on the other side. Make sure your chart lists facts.

6. Read this *Atlantic* article about Rikers Island:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/05/rikers-island/525858/>

Consider what the closure of Rikers would mean to the memory of Kalief Browder. On one side of a piece of paper, write the facts about the possible closure of Rikers. On the other side, write your opinions about what that closure might mean to Kalief's legacy.

7. Think like a lawyer. Read this definition of child abuse as provided by the federal government:

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/can/defining/federal/>

View this video of beatings Kalief received while wrongfully incarcerated:

<http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/exclusive-video-violence-inside-rikers>

In what ways was his experience child abuse? Should the city of New York and Rikers be held responsible for abusing Kalief while he was forced to live under their supervision? Draft a case to support your opinion using facts about child abuse and Kalief's experience.

8. Choreograph a dance, write a play, or craft a poem about Kalief Browder. Tell his life, using all the facts you've gathered, in a creative way that expresses all of your opinions about his experience on Rikers Island. ★

Lesson Plan Designer

**Eisa Nefertari Ulen** is a graduate of Sarah Lawrence College and earned a master's degree from Columbia University. She has taught at Hunter College and The Pratt Institute. She has contributed to numerous other publications, including *The Washington Post*, *Ms.*, *Health*, *Vibe*, *The Source*, *The Crisis*, *Black Issues Book Review*, *Quarterly Black Review of Books*, *TheRoot.com*, *TheDefendersOnline.com*, *TheGrio.com*, and *CreativeNonfiction.org*. Her essays on African American culture have been widely anthologized and explore topics ranging from Hip Hop, to Muslim life in America post-9/11, to contemporary Black literature, to the gap between the Civil Rights generation and Generation X. A founding member of Ringshout: A Place for Black Literature, she lives with her husband and son in Brooklyn.

**Literary Freedom Project (LFP)** is a Bronx-based 501c3 tax-exempt nonprofit arts organization that seeks to restore the importance of social and cultural identity through reading. Towards this goal, LFP publishes *Mosaic Literary Magazine*, develops literature-based lesson plans, presents One Book One Bronx, and hosts the Bronx Book Fair and Mosaic Literary Conference.

Programs of the Literary Freedom Project are funded primarily by donations and *Mosaic* subscribers. Additional funds have been provided in part by the Bronx Council on the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, Poets & Writers, Inc. through public funds from the New York State Department of Cultural Affairs; Humanities New York; Partnership for Parks; New York City Council's Parks Equity Initiative, Council Member Fernando Cabrera; and Citizens Committee of New York. [www.LiteraryFreedom.org](http://www.LiteraryFreedom.org)

