

# TAKE ACTION: I COULD TELL YOU 'BOUT MY LIFE



In crafting *I Could Tell You 'Bout My Life*, Michael Martin recounts events that led to his incarceration at Rikers Island Penitentiary at the age of 17. He describes being bored, “hanging with the wrong crowd,” and interviews his 64-year-old grandmother about raising five children in a one-bedroom apartment in East Harlem. When Michael asks his grandmother, Cynthia, how she became his guardian, she recalls how his mother “had problems,” and in order to avoid Michael falling into foster care, she “told that social worker I was taking you home with me.” She describes using a monthly \$231 from the Human Resources Administration and wages earned during 12-hour shifts to feed and clothe Michael and his siblings. When Michael asks his parole officer if he can imagine a better alternative to incarceration, he says, “I believe in education over incarceration” and reminds us that a year of incarceration costs the same as a year at an Ivy League university. Cynthia, her children, and her grandchildren are living out the legacy of hundreds of years of oppression—a history of slavery, segregation and institutionalized violence toward African Americans that has led to exponentially higher rates of poverty, mental illness and incarceration in their community. When thinking about the human right to an adequate living standard, the generations-long impact of slavery, institutionalized racism and discrimination on a community, and the treatment of minor (underaged) offenders, consider Articles 4, 7, 25 and 28 in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

*Article 4:*

*No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.*

*Article 7:*

*All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.*

*Article 25:*

*(1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.*

*(2) Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.*

Article 28:

*Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.*

## **For Teachers: Research**

Ask your students to consider how much money is spent each year on the prison system and incarceration, vs. how much money is spent on our educational system and schools. Research the phrase “school-to-prison pipeline.” How might an economic structure that puts more money into prisons and less into schools create such a pipeline? How might social structures such as lack of access to services, extreme poverty, lack of access to education, exposure to violence, and lack of societal, legal and political representation increase a person’s likelihood to commit a crime? Research these social structures and how they play out in different geographies today. How can we as teachers best engage students so they don’t get bored and, as Michael says, “do stupid stuff.” After doing this research and watching *I Could Tell You ‘Bout My Life*, do you think that there are citizens in the United States who are being denied basic human rights—including the right to a “social and international order in which the . . . freedoms set forth in the UNDHR can be fully realized?”

## **For Students: Reflect**

In this film, Michael uses music and spoken-word poetry to process his own experiences with crime, poverty and incarceration. Michael’s art helps him both reflect on, and better understand, the forces at work in his community. Consider this question yourself: what is justice? How can we all come together to create a world that is based on—and perpetuates—righteousness, equality, safety and fairness? What songs, videos, images and sculptures can you find that express crime, poverty and incarceration? Use the creative medium of your choice—music, poetry, visual art, film, spoken word—to imagine a world where our communal energies go into education, support, communication and justice, rather than toward punishment, judgment, segregation and castigation. In the film, women working at Friends of Island Academy talk about imagining a world without prisons. What would that world look like?

## **For All Of Us: Respond**

1. Join Friends of Island Academy to provide help, support or resources to other formerly incarcerated youth. Here are a few ways to support their work: offer a job or internship to one of our Youth Members; volunteer your time; mentor a young father; or join them for holiday celebrations, men’s or women’s group meetings, or for special events. Learn more at [www.friendsny.org](http://www.friendsny.org)
2. Sign a petition or start one of your own to raise awareness and support policies and legislation that address the negative effects of poverty, generational trauma and mass incarceration in communities of color at [www.change.org](http://www.change.org)
3. Host a community or private screening of *I Could Tell You ‘Bout My Life* to raise awareness of the challenges that face young, poor and marginalized young people in the US and how justice reform and community support can reverse many of these challenges. Email [info@bykids.org](mailto:info@bykids.org) for more information.
4. Avenues for Justice supports young, at-risk youth in New York by providing an alternative to incarceration. They provide art programs, tutoring and support programs to keep at-risk youth in school and out of jail. Learn more at [www.avenuesforjustice.org](http://www.avenuesforjustice.org)

5. Become a Big Brother or a Big Sister! Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America matches one child, usually from a single-parent, low-income family, with one adult volunteer, who serves as a mentor, friend and role model. There are 500 independent locally run agencies that provide counseling, referral and family support services to at-risk youth from around the nation. Learn more at [www.bbbs.org](http://www.bbbs.org)
6. Volunteer your time at the Fortune Society. This organization supports individuals who have been impacted by the justice system and welcomes volunteers for tutoring, mentoring, resume preparation, mock interviewing and special projects. Learn more at [fortunesociety.org/volunteer-or-intern-with-us/](http://fortunesociety.org/volunteer-or-intern-with-us/)

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