About Notes From The Field

*Notes From The Field* brings to film award-winning actress Anna Deavere Smith’s play of the same name. It is a powerful exploration of America’s “school to prison pipeline”- the process by which children and teens, specifically those from poor communities and communities of color, are pushed out of the classroom and into incarceration at an early age. All of the content for the film is based on interviews conducted by Smith with over 250 individuals from around the country including teachers, lawyers, activists, incarcerated youth, law enforcement officials, and others who are all stakeholders in this key issue. HBO’s film presentation of *Notes From The Field* dramatizes the accounts of these individuals with Smith portraying each of the interviewees. Smith’s revelatory performance, showcasing her theatrical mastery, draws the audience into this troubling phenomenon and leaves them questioning the institutional structures that are allowing such a phenomenon to occur.

Anna Deavere Smith

The creative mastermind behind *Notes From The Field*, Anna Deavere Smith, is an esteemed actress, playwright, and professor. She currently holds the position of “artist-in-residence” at the Center for American Progress. She is most widely known for her TV roles, starring in acclaimed series such as *The West Wing* and *Nurse Jackie*. Smith is celebrated for her one-woman plays often referred to as “documentary theater”, an innovative style of show that Smith herself invented. Her plays *Fires in the Mirror*, *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, and *Notes From The Field* are all are in this format- based entirely on interviews conducted by Smith starring her as the sole performer of a diverse set of characters. Her many accolades include a Pulitzer Prize nomination, two Tony Awards nominations, a Drama Desk Award, a Theater World Award, The Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize, and the National Humanities Medal awarded by President Barack Obama. She has also been the recipient of the MacArthur Fellowship (commonly referred to as the “genius grant”), the Fletcher Foundation Fellowship, and honorary degrees from over 20 universities. Her visionary work has advanced the national conversation around social issues involving race, class, and education.
“The camera is the only weapon we have to protect ourselves.”

- Kevin Moore

videographer of the Freddie Gray arrest
Introduction

• The film begins with Sherrilyn Ifill, the President and Director-Counsel of NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund. Ifill gives a simple definition of public policy - the specifically chosen investments of the country. She focuses on the significant investment the U.S. government makes in the criminal justice system and the ramifications of that policy decision in our nation.

Death of Freddie Gray

• Kevin Moore was the videographer of the Freddie Gray arrest in Baltimore, MD. Moore heard Freddie Gray’s arrest before he saw it, running from his apartment to follow the screams outside. He recounts the violence of the police, and his decision to film the encounter, claiming that the camera is the only weapon Black people have to protect themselves.
• Allen Bullock was a protester in Baltimore following the death of Freddie Gray. Bullock recalls being chased and beaten by the police and his subsequent arrest. He served 6 months in prison and was sentenced to 5 years probation.
• Jamal Harrison Bryant is the Pastor and Founder of Empowerment Temple AME Church in Baltimore, MD. Pastor Bryant spoke at the funeral for Freddie Gray, offering powerful remarks on the meaning and significance of his death.

Prison or Death

• Michael Tubbs is the mayor of Stockton, CA. He describes the nihilism prevalent among youth in his city, due to the incredibly challenging circumstances they face. Prison or death, these are the options for youth in Stockton according to Tubbs.
• Taos Proctor is a Yurok Fisherman on the Yurok Tribal Reservation in Klamath, CA. He is also a former inmate. Proctor tells his story of being expelled from many different schools as a youth and later being sent to multiple prisons. He speaks on the necessity of violence and toughness for survival prison, and how his life has changed after being released.
• Abby Abinanti is the Chief Judge for the Yurok Tribal Court in San Francisco and Klamath, CA. She expresses confusion about the common practice of expelling students when they misbehave instead of what she sees as the better alternative - drawing them close to address the source of their bad behavior. She also conveys her dismay with the criminal justice system, contending that it is focused on rules and power instead of justice.
• **Tony Eady** is a Student Concern Specialist at North Charleston High School in South Carolina. Eady describes the defiant attitude of the teenagers at North Charleston High and their trouble dealing with authority figures. He states his need of a police officer in the school, arguing that if teens can’t learn to deal with authority in school, they will end up in prison.

• **Amanda Ripley** is a Journalist and Senior Fellow at the Emerson Collective in Washington, D.C. Ripley details the events surrounding Niya Kenny’s viral video of a classmate being thrown to the ground by a police officer.

• **Niya Kenny** is a former student at Spring Valley High School in Columbia, SC who filmed a classmate being violently thrown out of her desk by an officer. Niya was arrested by the same officer after the encounter and sent to a detention center. She describes the events of that day, explaining her impulse to intervene when she perceived an injustice.

• **Leticia De Santiago** is an involved parent that lives in Stockton, CA. She divulges some of her monitoring methods for her sons, including late night sniffs of their clothing to check for illegal substances. She also notes that she chose to move from Vallejo to try and keep her kids out of prison.

• **Denise Dodson** is an inmate at the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women and a student with the Goucher Prison Education Partnership in Jessup, MD. Dodson shares her story of incarceration following her boyfriend’s murder of a man who tried to rape her. She describes the education she has attained in prison and how she believes a better education when she was younger could have changed her course.

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**Trauma**

• **Stephanie Williams** is an Emotional Support Teacher in Philadelphia, PA. She describes the overwhelming nature of her role at Samuel B. Huey public school, which she compares to trying to run a jail without a gun. She recalls specific situations she has faced at the school and the overall hopelessness she feels as a teacher there.

• **Dr. Victor Carrion, M.D.** is a Psychiatrist and the Director of the Stanford Early Stress Research Program at Stanford University in California. He discusses his research on trauma, specifically explaining the case of historical trauma and its effects.

• **Steven Campos** was a former inmate at O.H. Close Youth Correctional Facility in Stockton, CA. He now works as a dishwasher at Walt Disney Concert Hall in L.A. He expresses his disbelief in the existence of historical trauma and his view that people fake trauma in order to get medication.

• **James Baldwin** was a famous American novelist, playwright, and social critic. In this piece, spoken as a part of “A Rap on Race” with Margaret Mead in 1971, he describes the lack of identity provided in the west for Blacks, and the hopelessness of Black American youth in response to that.
Resistance

- **Bree Newsome** is an artist and activist from Charlotte, NC. She is famous for scaling the flagpole on the South Carolina state house grounds and removing the Confederate flag that flew there. Newsome shares the process that led to that significant event and some of her thoughts while she climbed the pole as police were threatening to tase her.

- Congressman **John Lewis** is a prominent civil rights leader and the U.S. representative for Georgia’s 5th congressional district. Lewis shares powerful stories of reconciliation with a police chief in Montgomery and a former Klan member. He calls these stories instances of grace and says that they remind him to never give up and keep the faith.
“How can you mind your business at something you need to make your business.”

- Niya Kenny

former student at Spring Valley High School
I. Introduction

• Sherrilyn Ifill: President and Director-Counsel of NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, Inc.

*Ifill mentions her discomfort with the question “what is the number one civil rights issue of the day” due to the interrelated nature of the issues. How are the civil rights issues you observe in the world today (i.e. mass incarceration, lack of educational opportunities, poverty) interrelated? What does that mean for how these issues should be addressed?

*Ifill says that as a country, we make investments. Where do you think our nation is making its largest investments? What about your local community? Do you think there needs to be changes to those investments?

II. Death of Freddie Gray

• Kevin Moore: Videographer of the Freddie Gray Beating, Deli Worker, Baltimore, MD

“The camera is the only weapon we have to protect ourselves.” What role does media play in social movements? Have you personally used some form of media to engage with social issues?

• Allen Bullock: Protester, Baltimore MD

What is the status of police brutality in our nation? Do you think the country has made changes on this front since Gray’s death? Do you think police behavior today is consistent with Bullock’s description?

• Jamal Harrison Bryant: Pastor and Founder, Empowerment Temple AME Church, Baltimore, MD

What do you think about the saying “no justice, no peace”? What does it mean to you?

What is your opinion of Bryant’s advice to persons of color to “get yourself up”?

Discussion Questions
III. Prison or Death

- Michael Tubbs: Mayor, Stockton, CA

  *Do you agree with Tubbs that nihilism is a prevailing sentiment amongst Black and Brown youth?*

  *What do you think needs to happen culturally so that youth do not face this choice of prison or death as Tubbs describes?*

- Taos Proctor: Yurak Fisherman, Former Inmate, Yurok Tribal Reservation, Klamath, CA

  *Prison doesn’t do nothing but make you a worser and worser person.*

  *Do you agree with Proctor? What would you consider to be the purpose of prison? Do you think our criminal justice system needs reform?*

- Abby Abinanti: Chief Judge, Yurok Tribal Court, San Francisco and Klamath, CA

  *Abinanti casts suspicion on the effectiveness of expelling or suspending children with behavioral problems. Do you think suspension or expulsion are a fitting way to deal with students’ bad behavior?*

  *Abinanti asserts that if you don’t have a supportive adult in your life, you won’t be able to make it. Can you identify the supportive adults in your life who have helped you get where you are? How can you be that support for others?*

- Tony Eady: Student Concern Specialist, North Charleston High School, SC

  *Why does Tony Eady believe there should be police in high schools? Do you agree?*

- Amanda Ripley: Journalist, Senior Fellow, Emerson Collective Washington, D.C.

  *In describing the events surrounding Niya Kenny’s viral video, Amanda Ripley includes that Niya, 18, is sent to an adult prison after the encounter. What are your thoughts on high school students being sent to an adult prison?*
• Niya Kenny: Former Student, Spring Valley High School, Columbia, SC.

“How can you mind your business at something you need to make your business.” Do we have an obligation as citizens to intervene in situations where we perceive injustice? What kind of situation constitutes an intervention? What would you have done if you were Niya?

• Leticia De Santiago: parent Stockton, CA

To what degree is it parents’ responsibility to keep their children out of trouble? Do you think they have control over that?

• Denise Dodson: Inmate, Maryland Correctional Institution for Women, Student, Goucher Prison Education Partnership, Jessup, MD

Denise Dodson was convicted of first degree murder after her boyfriend shot and killed the man who tried to rape her. Having spent 23 years in prison, she says the sentence she received was fair. Do you think it was fair? Do you think convictions similar to Dodson’s are common?

IV. Trauma

• Stephanie Williams: Emotional Support Teacher, Philadelphia, PA

Were you surprised by Williams’ description of the school in which she worked?

What can our country do to support educators?

• Dr. Victor Carrion, M.D.: Psychiatrist and Director, Stanford Early Stress Research Program, Stanford University, CA

Have you heard of historical trauma? What does it mean for trauma to be passed epigenetically? What does this have to do with slavery?

• Steven Campos: Former Inmate, O.H. Close Youth Correctional Facility, Stockton, CA, Dishwasher Walt Disney Concert Hall

Do you agree with Campos in his appraisal of historical trauma? Why do you think he does not believe in it?
• James Baldwin: Spoken as a part of “A Rap on Race” with Margaret Mead, 1971

*What does Baldwin mean by “there is a tremendous, national, global, moral waste”?*

*Baldwin’s statements conclude with a charge- “we are responsible for the future of this world”. In what ways do you think you are responsible for the future of this world?*

V. Resistance

• Bree Newsome: Artist and Activist, Charleston, SC

*Bree Newsome chose to scale the flagpole on the South Carolina state house grounds in order to bring down the Confederate Flag. What has your own community’s response been to the controversy over the Confederate Flag?*

• Congressman John Lewis: U.S. Representative (D- GA 5th District) Washington D.C.

*Congressman John Lewis shared a powerful story about a police chief in Montgomery apologizing for the beatings Lewis endured in Montgomery many years ago. Lewis calls this a story of grace. Have you heard any inspiring stories recently like Lewis’s story of reconciliation?*

*Lewis ends, “Never give up, never give in, never lose faith, keep the faith.” What gives you hope about the future in regards to social change?*
“Prison doesn’t do nothing but make you a worser and worser person.”

- Taos Proctor

Yurak Fisherman, Former Inmate
Additional Resources

American Civil Liberties Union
Children's Defense Fund
NAACP Legal Defense Fund
Advancement Project
Morgan Center for Youth Advocacy
Center for Civil Rights Remedies