Not Me, Not Mine: Adult Survivors of Foster Care

An EVC Study Guide
Acknowledgements

STUDY GUIDE
Writer: Sarah Strauss
Editor: Jen Meagher

Not Me, Not Mine: Undocumented Immigrant Youth
was produced by five New York City youth who participated in EVC’s Fall 2002-2003 Youth Organizers Television (YO-TV) Program.

Antonio Abreu
Mavis Chen
Anthony Cordoba
Carol Olate
Raphael Quintero

YO-TV Director: Julie Criniere


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Introduction

The Educational Video Center is a non-profit youth media organization dedicated to teaching documentary video as a means to develop the artistic, critical literacy, and career skills of young people, while nurturing their idealism and commitment to social change.

Founded in 1984, EVC has evolved from a single video workshop for teenagers from Manhattan’s Lower East Side to become an internationally acclaimed leader in youth media and education. EVC’s teaching methodology brings together the powerful traditions of student-centered progressive education and independent community documentary.

ADDITIONAL EVC CORE PROGRAMS

**Documentary Workshop** is a 15-week credit-bearing course that teaches high school students from undeserved communities across New York City to research, shoot, and edit compelling documentaries that examine issues of immediate relevance in their lives.

**Youth Organizers Television (YO-TV)** is a ten-month pre-professional paid internship that jumpstarts the college and media careers of graduates of the Documentary Workshop.

**External Education Programs** provide workshops and resources in media production and EVC’s methodology, including EVC’s *Youth-Powered Video DVD Curriculum*, for K-12 teachers and after-school educators, nationally and abroad.

**Community Engagement** promotes civic engagement and social change through the distribution of EVC’s youth-produced documentaries in collaboration with strategic partners.
EVC documentaries are powerful, and often deal with sensitive issues. For this reason, we recommend that you preview the Not Me, Not Mine documentary and supporting materials before using them in the classroom. The curriculum we’ve prepared represents suggestions for using Not Me, Not Mine: Adult Survivors of Foster Care. If any of the activities are not useful to you, feel free to modify them and design your own.

Assumed in this guide are the following beliefs about teaching and learning:

- Writing deepens thinking and is one of the best ways to explore sensitive issues, even before discussion.
- All learning starts from the students’ own experiences.
- Diversity of opinion is useful in a classroom and must be respected.
- Students can make a difference in the world.
- Students can learn from each other.
- Social issues and community problems are an integral part of the school curriculum.
- Students learn from a variety of methods.
- Students learn best through experience.
- An active viewing experience leads to a richer understanding of the documentary.

Before using these materials, consider the following questions.

- How similar/different are your students and their experiences from the students who made this video?
- How does this video relate to the subject you are teaching?
- What results do you hope to see from using this video?
- What concerns do you have about your students’ responses to the issues raised in this video?
- What background information will your students need before viewing this tape?

For many teachers, having students write or take notes while viewing is not something new. For others, this aspect of active viewing is a bit controversial. Some feel it gets in the way of their viewing experience, while others feel it enhances it. You may want to show the tape twice: the first time to view it, and the second time to complete the viewing exercise. Your comments and questions are always welcome. Contact us at info@evc.org.
Background Information

RUNNING TIME:
The full version of Not Me, Not Mine is 30 minutes long. To keep within the time constraints of a 45-minute class, we’ve also created a 13-minute version. This study guide can be used with either version. The “Play the Video” menu on the Not Me, Not Mine DVD will allow you to play the version of your choice.

SYNOPSIS:
EVC youth producers search for seven foster care youth interviewed in the 1994 EVC documentary Some Place to Call Home. As these now adult survivors reflect on their experiences aging out of foster care nine years later, they offer a profound analysis of the challenges facing foster care youth and those working to support them.

INTERVIEWEES:
Angie ran away from home when she was 14 years old after being abused by her father. She first went to a group home and then asked to be placed into foster care. Her placement was not what she’d hoped for. “I had a roof over my head and a hot meal, but no love or affection.”

Addicted to drugs and barely coping, Makeba’s mother released Makeba and her two brothers for adoption in 1982. Makeba’s grandmother took care of them, only to later lose them to the foster care system. Makeba was told they had to leave because her grandmother was going to die. However, her grandmother lived for another ten years, something that caused Makeba much pain in later life. “I feel like they stole ten years from me.”

Five other foster care youth interviewed for the 1994 EVC documentary Some Place to Call Home were not available for follow-up interviews in 2003. They appear in the 30-minute version of Not Me, Not Mine, explaining the circumstances that brought them into the foster care system.

Wunika: “My mother had a lot of problems and wasn’t able to take care of me the proper way, and now I have someone who’s doing that for me.”

Albert: “…One day she (my mother) left the house and said she had to go out. And then what happened was she got sick. So when I was with the babysitter, the babysitter had to call BCW (Bureau of Child Welfare), and they put me in a foster home for a few months…”
Kenyatta: “...Me and her (Kenyatta’s mother) got into a fight, a physical and verbal fight. The reason we got into the fight was because she left me in the house for a week by myself, and I didn’t feel it was fair or right.”

Donna: “I came into the system in 1989. At first my case was a neglect case and then I became voluntarily placed. My mother is a Jehovah’s Witness. We weren’t getting along, so I left.”

FACTS FROM THE DOCUMENTARY:
The foster care system is designed to provide a safe haven for youth under 21 living in unsafe conditions. Youth are either placed in a group home, with extended family members, or with families licensed by a public agency. Older youth who wish to be released to themselves may enter into Independent Living where they receive counseling on life skills like job hunting and how to pay bills and rent. There are three basic ways for a child to enter the foster care system.

- The parent can voluntarily place their child into foster care.
- The Bureau of Child Welfare can remove a child who is being abused or neglected at home.
- The court can file a PINS petition (Person in Need of Supervision).

Foster care is meant to serve as a temporary solution. Ideally, the child will either return to his/her biological parents or will be adopted. However, approximately one quarter of the 500,000 youth living in foster care in the U.S. in 2005 remained in the system until age 21 (Jim Lehrer News Hour, 5/19/05).

At 21, foster care youth must “age out” of the system. Some foster care youth transition successfully to independent living. However, the vast majority do not.

1,000 youth age out of the New York City foster care system each year.

- 15% of these youth are unemployed.
- 37% do not have a high school diploma.
- 33% become homeless.
- 25% are later incarcerated.

Nationwide, approximately 30,000 young people age out of the foster care system each year. According to the Child Welfare League of America:

- 56% of these youth are unemployed.
- 25% become homeless.
- 27% of young males are later incarcerated.
Lesson Plan

FOCUS QUESTION: What challenges must young people overcome to survive and succeed on their own after foster care?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:
Students will:
• learn about the challenges young people face as they go through and age out of New York’s foster care system;
• identify how foster care youth have been helped or have helped themselves to successfully navigate the system; and,
• consider what can be done to help improve the lives of those who age out of the foster care system.

EDUCATION STANDARDS
NYS Language Arts Standard 3; NCTE Standard 9; NYS Social Studies Standard 5, NYS Arts Standard 3; NETS Technology Standard 6; NYS Mathematics, Science, & Technology Standard 7

*Note: This lesson plan is designed for a 45-minute class period. If you have a longer class period, we recommend that you show your class the full 30-minute version and follow the same lesson plan outlined below. You can select your version of choice in the “Play the Video” menu on the Not Me, Not Mine DVD.

PREPARATION:
Before your students arrive:

1. Prepare markers and large newsprint for note-taking during the post-screening discussion (or you can use the chalkboard).

2. Photocopy the Talking Back Homework Assignment on pages 11 and 12 and cut these copies in half so you have one per sheet.

3. Test out the TV and DVD Player and make sure that the TV volume is set to a comfortable level. Ideally, your students will all be seated close enough to the TV to read the captions, but, if not, you can pause the video and read the captions aloud.

4. Finally, use the chalkboard or newsprint to write out the following lists to help your students stay focused while they watch the film.
**WRITE THE FOLLOWING ON THE BOARD:**

About Today’s Film

**Background:**

Original film: *Some Place to Call Home* (1994)

Follow-up film: *Not Me, Not Mine: Adult Survivors of Foster Care* (2003)

**People:**

Angie Baptist (and son), Former Foster Care Youth

Makeba Lawrence (and sons), Former Foster Care Youth

**Terms:**

*EAU* – Emergency Assistant Units or homeless shelters

*ACS* – New York City’s Administration for Children’s Services

*Section 8* – Created in 1974, this program helps families and individuals living on low-incomes obtain housing. Congress has renamed it the “Housing Choice Voucher Program”, but some still call it “Section 8”, a name taken from the law that originally created this program.¹

*Aging Out* – When foster care youth reach the age of majority (usually 21, though it varies from state to state) they are released from foster care and forced to fend for themselves with very little outside support.²

**NOTE:** After your students arrive, make sure they have paper and a writing utensil for note taking before starting the lesson.

**GROUND RULES:** (4 minutes) Explain to the class that today you’ll be watching a video and having a class discussion about foster care. It’s important to acknowledge that this is a difficult issue, so we as a class need to discuss this in a way that shows sensitivity, compassion, and respect for one another.


GROUND RULES (continued): Ask the class to come up with a list of ground rules for creating a safe space for your discussion. Possible suggestions include: only one person talks at a time (one mic), active listening (let others know that you hear them, try to relate what you say to comments others have made), respect others’ opinions even if you don’t agree with them, avoid negative labels (i.e. that comment was stupid, wrong, bad, etc.).

PRE-VIEWING DISCUSSION: (5-7 minutes) Ask students to answer the following questions aloud or you can have students jot down their responses in their notebooks before holding the discussion, bearing in mind that this will add a few minutes to the segment.

In the United States, what are the most important responsibilities adults are expected to carry out?

Ask students to share their thoughts about this question. Write down their responses on the chalkboard or newsprint. Encourage students to consider why the following responsibilities might be especially hard for foster care youth.

- Financial responsibilities (housing, finding and holding a job, paying bills);
- Personal responsibilities (raising children, maintaining close relationships with friends, family, and co-workers);
- Planning for the future; and
- Finding help (knowing how to locate and access important resources like social services, loans, public benefits, counseling, healthcare, etc.)

You can also ask:
- Why do some foster care youth have more difficulty meeting these expectations than others?
- Are there different expectations for adults based on their identities (e.g. their gender, race, ethnicity, religion, social class, etc.)?

As you conclude this discussion, you can point out that many of these issues will be central to the film you are about to view.
INTRODUCING THE DOCUMENTARY: (3 minutes) Please share the following information with your class.

In 1994, 12 teens from the Educational Video Center (EVC) in New York City made Some Place to Call Home, a short documentary about youth living in the New York foster care system. Nine years later, another group of EVC students tried to find and interview the same youth to see how well they had transitioned out of foster care. This follow-up documentary is called Not Me, Not Mine: Adult Survivors of Foster Care.

Briefly review the lists of related people and terms written on the board.

ACTIVE VIEWING EXERCISE: (explanation, 2 minutes) Divide the class in half, and ask one group to focus on Angie’s story and the second group to focus on Makeba’s story. Each group should take notes on the struggles faced by their assigned character. They should also write down examples of when outside forces – the foster care system, the legal system, community arts groups, etc. – either provide support or create greater obstacles for these youth as they struggle to start their own lives.

SCREEN THE DOCUMENTARY: (Study Guide Version, 13 minutes or Full Version, 30 minutes)

POST-Screening DISCUSSION: (5-7 minutes)
Ask students from each group to report back on their notes on the video. Highlight the following in your discussion:

• What are the challenges each young person faces?
• How successful are they in meeting these challenges?
• Is one of these young women more successful than the other? If so, how is she more successful? Why is this the case?
• What role do outside forces play in these two women’s experiences? Which forces are positive and which are negative?

SHORT IN-CLASS WRITING ACTIVITY: (8-10 minutes)
In preparation for their homework assignment, ask students to write a brief response to Angie or Makeba. Students can focus on a moment from the film that grabbed their attention. They can describe how they felt, or what they learned. They can describe a similar experience from their own lives, or offer advice to Angie or Makeba. Afterwards, ask students to expand on what they wrote in class for their homework assignment (see next page).
Talking Back

For this homework assignment, choose one of the following options.

1) Expand on your in-class written response to the film by writing an actual dialogue you imagine would occur between you and either Angie or Makeba from the documentary. As a part of this dialogue, use at least one quotation of your choice from the list below.

2) Expand on your in-class written response to the film by writing an imagined dialogue that Angie and Makeba might have with each other. As a part of this dialogue, use at least one quotation of your choice from the list below.

3) Pair up with another student to write a dialogue in which one of you takes the point of view of Angie and the other takes the point of view of Makeba. Together, write an imagined dialogue these women might have with each other. As a part of this dialogue, use at least one quotation from Angie and one quotation from Makeba from the list below.

**Quotation A (Makeba):** “Statistically speaking, my kids are not supposed to be with me. I’m supposed to be on drugs. My life is not supposed to be this way…but I broke the chain. I said, ‘Not me, not mine.’”

**Quotation B (Makeba, to her son):** “Look at all I’ve accomplished since coming here...It wasn’t happening like that in New York. I was struggling...It’s my responsibility that your path is right. So, you will get over not liking Maryland.”

**Quotation C (Angie):** “I just try to think positive more in order to keep me going...but sometimes I feel that [there’s something] pulling me and not wanting me to accomplish [something for me and my son].”

**Quotation D (Angie):** “I didn’t have any place to go when I aged out. I went to my father’s ex-girlfriend’s house because I couldn’t find an apartment. I wasn’t really ready to meet the outside world and be on my own.”
Note on the Assignment

*Note for Teachers: If you think it will be helpful, you can provide students with minimum and maximum page limits for this dialogue that you feel are appropriate to the amount of time they will have to complete this assignment. Also, on the day you collect these assignments, you might ask students to volunteer to share their dialogues or to comment on what they learned by writing the dialogue.
Appendix: Online Resources

Child Welfare League of America  www.cwla.org
CWLA is an association of nearly 800 public and private nonprofit agencies that assist more than 3.5 million abused and neglected children and their families each year with a range of services.

National Foster Parent Association  www.nfpainc.org
The National Foster Parent Association strives to support foster parents and provide a consistently strong voice on behalf of all children.

National Foster Youth Advisory Council  www.nfyac.org
A diverse national group comprised of current and former foster youth, providing a voice and making a difference in the lives of youth that are currently in care.

National Network for Youth in Foster Care  www.fosterclub.com
FosterClub's mission is to provide encouragement, motivation, information, education, and benefits for foster youth.

Vera Institute of Justice  www.vera.org
The Vera Institute of Justice works closely with leaders in government and civil society to improve the services people rely on for safety and justice. Their Child Welfare and Youth Services program offers research on foster care youth.

Youth Advocacy Center  www.youthadvocacycenter.org
YAC's mission is to teach young adults in and at risk of foster care to advocate for themselves and take control of their lives. Teens in and at risk of foster care have the desire, talents and potential to be participating citizens - to hold jobs, to play a role in their community, to live in safe neighborhoods and to raise their children to be educated and healthy.

Youth Communication  www.youthcomm.org
Youth Communication helps teenagers develop their skills in reading, writing, thinking, and reflection, so they can acquire the information they need to make thoughtful choices about their lives. Represent is Youth Communication’s bi-monthly, 40-page magazine written by and for young people in foster care, with a nationwide circulation.