

# INFLUENCE | FILM CLUB

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## Brooklyn Castle Discussion Guide

Director: Katie Dellamaggiore

Year: 2012

Time: 101 min

**You might know this director from:**

**BROOKLYN CASTLE** is the first feature-length documentary film from this director.

## FILM SUMMARY

When Director Katie Dellamaggiore discovered the chess team at I.S. 318, a middle school close to her Brooklyn apartment, the kids did not fit the stereotype of poor minority children drifting through life, idly passing time before succumbing to ghetto life. Through a well-managed chess program organized by a devoted teaching staff, the students of I.S. 318 offer a spectacular story.

**BROOKLYN CASTLE** introduces a cast of real-life champions: I.S. 318 staff Elizabeth Spiegel, John Galvin, and Fred Rubino, who fight to keep the chess program alive. Students Rochelle Ballantyne, Pobo Efekoro, Justus Williams, and Alexis Paredes rise from poverty conditions and devote themselves to extensive chess lessons, including many hours of practice. By following the chess team, both at school and on their travels as they compete on a national level across the U.S., **BROOKLYN CASTLE** examines the parallels between chess and life while offering solid proof that an inner-city public school can be a breeding ground for true greatness.

In the midst of filming, the 2008 financial crisis struck. Extensive budget cuts are made, threatening the chess team, but the students persevere. They battle snowstorms to reach competitions and find ways of funding themselves. A tale for children and adults alike, **BROOKLYN CASTLE** reveals the benefits of extracurricular activities, and how devotion, dedication, and patience can make dreams come true. Through the moving pieces on a chessboard, the components of life fall gradually into place for the I.S. 318 community.

## FILM THEMES

**BROOKLYN CASTLE** shows how these kids' dedication to chess magnifies their belief in what is possible for their lives. After all, if they can master the world's most difficult game, what can't they do?

### **CHESS LESSONS = LIFE LESSONS**

There are endless configurations and outcomes in a single game of chess. The moves made on a chessboard can be viewed symbolically as the infinite possibilities within in a single life. By learning how to become a master of chess, the kids arguably learn how to cope with and succeed at life. The game requires them to focus, think as individuals, analyze, challenge themselves, bounce back from disappointment, lose with grace, and compete fairly. While academia offers certain truths that all children are expected to respect, chess offers them valuable tools for managing the real world.

### **RICH MAN'S MISTAKE, POOR MAN'S SUFFERING**

Through the greed and mismanagement of powerbrokers, the 2008 economic crisis had a far-reaching impact on wider communities. I.S. 318 had previously offered impoverished children the opportunity to travel across the nation for chess competitions, along with an enriching after-school program. In the wake of the crisis, however, repeated budget cuts were announced, and the school was forced to reconsider its priorities. Even if the poorest were hit hardest by the financial crisis, the students and faculty of I.S. 318 proved that nothing - not even drastic financial restrictions - could stop them from carrying on.

### **PERSONAL VS. PUBLIC PRESSURE**

I.S. 318 chess team members had several motivations for winning: a personal desire to be the best, to be the first African American female master, to get into a good high school and possibly a better college, to secure a well-paying job, or to financially support their parents. The pressure to win and succeed was overwhelming at times. Left to their own instincts, perhaps they would have played for the pure pleasure of the game. But the stakes were higher, and the kids were aware of the sacrifices their parents were making. Many of the children were subjected to pressure from many corners, including their families.

### **THE AMERICAN DREAM**

When Alexis Paredes announced to his parents that he had been accepted at two top high schools, his mother responded, "My dream is coming true." Many of the families at I.S. 318 emigrated to the U.S. in pursuit of the American Dream and actively strived to offer their children a better life than the one they'd known. With every academic and extracurricular success, these children proved that with perseverance and devotion, America was still full with possibility, and that perhaps the much-acclaimed American Dream truly was alive and well.

**“The nice thing about chess is that it is inherently fair, inherently gender and color blind. If you play well, you win. If you play badly, you lose. There’s no one making a subjective evaluation, so there is no possibility of discrimination.”**

Elizabeth Spiegel

**“If I didn’t have chess, I wouldn’t be talking to you right now. I wouldn’t be in 318.”**

Pobo Efekoro



## FILM FACTS:

- BROOKLYN CASTLE won a Golden Trailer Award and an Audience Award at the Philadelphia Film Festival. It was also nominated for a Black Reel Award and an Image Award.
- Rochelle Ballantyne, whose grandmother introduced her to the game of chess, is currently studying Political Science and African and African-American Studies at Stanford University.
- Director Dellamaggiore lives in Brooklyn, close to I.S. 318. Before filming BROOKLYN CASTLE, she had never played a game of chess, but did manage to learn the fundamentals of the game during the filming process. Dellamaggiore's husband worked as the film editor, and both of them are still very much involved in the lives of the I.S. 318 students.
- Intermediate School (I.S.) 318, otherwise known as The Eugenio Maria de Hostos School, is located in Williamsburg, Brooklyn and has a total of 1,632 students, grades 6-8. Over 70% of the students' families live below the poverty line, 62% of students are Hispanic, 17% are black, 14% are white, and 7% are Asian. 100% of the students qualify for free school lunches. More than 95% of student's parents said they were satisfied or very satisfied with the education their child received at I.S. 318.
- Elizabeth Spiegel, the chess teacher at I.S. 318, started playing chess with her father at the age of 4, entering tournaments in middle school.
- Chess has its origins in India, where there is evidence of a war game called "Chatarung" being played around 600 AD. Chess reached Europe through Persian traders around 1000 AD and became very popular, often used as an excuse for young men and woman to spend intimate time together. In the late 1400s, the game took a modern form, the queen transforming from the weakest to the strongest piece on the board, and the bishop gaining long-range. Both of these alterations drastically quickened the pace of the game. The first U.S. Chess Championship was held in 1845, but women were allowed to compete until 1937.
- Benjamin Franklin, one of the Founding Fathers of the United States, was a great chess aficionado. In 1786 he published an essay entitled "The Morals of Chess," one of the first chess-related articles published in the U.S. In it, he expounds on the virtues of the game. The essay is still widely reproduced today.
- 3% of U.S. Chess Federation members are women.
- 87% of the students on the I.S. 318 chess team are from homes with income below the poverty line, which is set at \$22,000 for a family of four.
- 15 million school-age children, roughly 26% of the total school population in the U.S., are totally alone after school. Research states that without after-school programs, the temptation of drugs and alcohol is strong.

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Consider hosting a screening and a discussion with friends, family or colleges.
2. Support [Chess-In-The Schools](#), "a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to improving academic performance and building self-esteem among inner-city public school children,". They need volunteers and financial donations.
3. Volunteer your time at an after-school program. [Citizen Schools](#) offers suggestions within the U.S.
4. Learn how to play or improve the skills you already have at [Chesscademy](#).

## We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

**Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.**