



BIG SONIA

SURVIVOR. GRANDMA. DIVA.



INFLATABLE FILM & ARGOT PICTURES PRESENTS A FILM BY LEAH WARSHAWSKI & TODD SOLIDAY

IN ASSOCIATION WITH SIFF / TRUE PRODUCTIONS & WOMEN YOU SHOULD FUND & BYEN | DIRECTED BY LEAH WARSHAWSKI & TODD SOLIDAY | PRODUCED BY LEAH WARSHAWSKI | ORIGINAL SCORE BY BRAD ANTHONY LAINA | EXECUTIVE PRODUCER TOM WRIGHT
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About *Journeys in Film*

Teaching Core Curriculum with Film

Founded in 2003, Journeys in Film operates on the belief that teaching with film has the power to help our next generation gain a richer understanding of the diverse and complex world in which we live. Our goal is to help students recognize cultural biases and racism (including their own), cultivate human empathy and compassion, develop a deeper knowledge of universal issues and current challenges, and encourage civic engagement as competent world citizens.

Award-winning feature films and documentaries act as springboards for lesson plans in subjects ranging from math, science, language arts, and social studies to other topics that have become critical for students to learn about: human rights, environmental sustainability, poverty, hunger, global health, diversity, gender, and immigration. Prominent educators on our team consult with filmmakers and cultural specialists in the development of curriculum guides, each one dedicated to an in-depth exploration of the culture and issues depicted in a specific film. The guides complement teachers' existing lesson plans and meet mandated curricular requirements, providing teachers with an innovative way to fulfill their school districts' standards-based goals.

We prepare teachers to use film effectively in the classroom through customized professional development workshops and online webinars.

Journeys in Film is an organization with proven results. Individual teachers worldwide and entire school districts in the U.S. have employed our interdisciplinary film-based curricula.

- Millions of students have learned about our multicultural world through Journeys in Film's middle school series, based on films from Iran, South Africa, South Korea, the Maori of New Zealand, Tibet, India, China and Saudi Arabia.
- Students are becoming inspired by the courageous contemporary and historical figures portrayed in films such as *Hidden Figures*, *The Post*, and *He Named Me Malala*.
- Films like *Schindler's List*, *Defiant Requiem*, and *Big Sonia* not only teach about the Holocaust, but also demonstrate how one person can make a difference in the lives of others.
- Teachers are using our outstanding documentary series to teach about historical events, American prison systems, the critical role of photojournalists, and positive psychology.

Journeys in Film guides help teachers integrate these films into their classrooms, examining complex issues, encouraging students to be active rather than passive viewers, and maximizing the power of film to enhance critical thinking skills and to meet the Common Core Standards.

Why teach with film?

Today's students are the most visually literate generation in history. According to the Social Science Research Network, 65% of people are primarily visual learners. Today's students are more affected by media than ever before. They seldom need to be coaxed into watching films; after all, everyone loves a good movie. Through their own desire to be entertained, students become captivated learners.

Films have long been overlooked as an educational tool. We teach our students literature that originates from many places around the world, but we tend to forget that what often spurs the imagination is both visual and auditory. Film, which in minutes can be screened and beamed to every country in the world, is this extraordinary educational tool that goes right into the heart of different cultures. One of its strengths lies in its ability to present information rapidly and convey atmosphere, making that world come to life. It allows viewers to "feel" and thereby develop empathy skills, thus potentially increasing the likelihood of students connecting personally to the content, which in turn helps with understanding and analyzing concepts.

In teaching with films, we encourage our students to be critical consumers of what they see and teach them to consider the perspective of the filmmaker and challenge generalizations. Analyzing film and media is an empowering skill and one that is increasingly important for young people. To this end, it is imperative to integrate the film into a larger lesson, using it as a launching pad for historical and cultural exploration, as well as an examination of narrative perspective, character development, and media literacy.

In one 7th grade student's words, "I like Journeys in Film because it just doesn't teach you like a book. It's better when you can actually see it happening. Films give a first-hand view of places and stories."

Journeys in Film is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

Directors' Statement



Sometimes the really big stories come from the smallest places. As filmmakers, we travel all over the world chasing stories about people making an impact. In making *Big Sonia*, we realized some of those stories are right in our own backyards and that you don't have to go far to come home.



When we began filming in 2011, Leah's grandmother Sonia Warshawski was 85 years old, and we had just started dating. On the heels of our last feature documentary, *Finding Hillywood*, our intention was to make

a short film about Sonia's small tailoring shop, John's Tailoring, and the steady stream of loyal customers that came in for the conversation as much as for tailoring. Sonia's extended family had joked for years about using the shop as the subject of a reality show. We'd all long witnessed Sonia holding court from her counter-top podium, doling out marriage advice, recommending books about WWII to teenagers, and doing interviews for local news stations. We knew Sonia had a gift for making anyone in her shop feel like the most important person in the world. And we knew the shop was her own refuge from the horrors of her past as a teenage Holocaust survivor.

However, once we started filming for our short, our anticipated *weeks* of production turned into *months*. It soon became apparent to us that customers were drawn to John's Tailoring not just for gossip and a bit of human connection, but for their

own redemption. They came in because Sonia sets a glowing example of how an ordinary person can move past deep personal and historical trauma to find peace and heal others.

Still, our time with Sonia revealed her complex side. Her interactions with customers — many of whom she sees as her best friends — are very different from her relationships with her own family, which have often been tense and tender, overshadowed by decades of survivor's guilt and post-traumatic stress. During the course of production, we began to perceive the trauma suffered not just by Sonia, but by my aunts and father, who had survived their own brand of trauma in a household gripped by grief and loss. We also began to see the ways in which Sonia's pain had branded Leah, as a third-generation survivor, the grandchild of refugees, and the child of a parent who'd long grappled with his own mother's distance and pain.

Then, suddenly, the plot turned. Sonia got an eviction notice for John's Tailoring, her home-away-from-home for 35 years. Her panic was palpable. And while we knew Sonia would survive the physical loss of her shop, we were also compelled by her store's powerfully symbolic role as a forum for human connection—a stronghold and a place of safety for Sonia and so many others. We continued to fundraise and film, and our “short” turned into a feature. Oh, and somehow in the middle of it all, we got married. The store was now woven into the fabric of our lives, too.

Despite featuring a Holocaust survivor, *Big Sonia* is not a “Jewish movie.” And it's not a “Holocaust movie.” More than anything, *Big Sonia* is a story about humanity: our human potential to overcome even the worst of the world's sins and atrocities with love, compassion and understanding. It's a tale about survival, yes, but not only the heroic kind—the kind

that was forced upon Sonia and is forced upon other victims of genocide and hatred. It's also about the everyday acts of survival we must all undertake just to be human: to overlook slights and disappointments, to rise above bigotry and ignorance and self-doubt, to push for peace and forgiveness even when our instincts urge retribution or bitterness.

We premiered *Big Sonia* at bi-coastal film festivals the day after the 2016 presidential election. At the time, we had no way of knowing that the themes of our film would find new relevance in our current political moment. Sonia's life story has been called an antidote to the hate and fear we see around us, and we hope that is true. But the real lesson of *Big Sonia* is that we've *all* got the capacity to combat the worst humanity has to offer. Like Sonia, we all have the opportunity to create for others the places of comfort and connection where survival takes root.

With love and gratitude,

Leah Warshawski & Todd Soliday

Co-Directors

Big Sonia

Introducing *Big Sonia*

Teaching about the Holocaust is essential, and yet recent statistics show that many Americans simply do not know about it.¹ Sometimes the overwhelming numbers that died as a result of Hitler's rise to power is hard for the human mind to comprehend. In this film, however, the viewer learns about the Holocaust through the eyes of one person who lived through it and her family, who were forever shaped by the events of the 1940s.

Teenage Sonia Warshawski was living with her mother, father, sister, and brother in Międzyrzec, Poland, when the German army invaded. Her father and brother were shot, her sister disappeared and her survival was uncertain, and Sonia and her mother were forced to work as slave laborers until the day they were deported to the Majdanek death camp. After her mother died in the gas chamber, Sonia was sent first to Auschwitz-Birkenau and then to Bergen-Belsen, where she was finally liberated as the war drew to a close.

This film by her granddaughter gives students insight into both the horrors of the Holocaust as a whole and the profound effect that it had on one individual and succeeding generations. Now in her nineties, Sonia is a vibrant, busy woman who loves interacting with family and with the customers who come to her tailor shop. She speaks to school groups, prison inmates, and others about her experiences. Her story is one of unimaginable suffering, but also of hope, of resilience, and of a refusal to let herself hate. Classes viewing this film will have a memorable experience, a blend of factual knowledge of history and the personal story of a remarkable woman.

Film credits:

DIRECTORS: Leah Warshawski & Todd Soliday

WRITTEN BY: Eric Frith

PRODUCER: Leah Warshawski

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: Dwayne J. Clark, Thomas Lee Wright

CO-EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: Claude and Bertina Thau,
Ni'Coel Stark

MUSIC: Brad Anthony Laina

CINEMATOGRAPHY: Todd Soliday

¹ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/study-shows-americans-are-forgetting-about-holocaust-n865396>



Learning from the Past: An Oral History Assignment

Enduring Understandings

- Oral tradition has been a critical method of history sharing.
- Storytelling is a way to connect with others.
- Oral and written history are equally valid across many societies that have relied on both to maintain cultures and traditions.

Essential Questions

- What is oral history and why is it important?
- How can we learn about historical events directly from people's lived experiences?
- How can we share the stories of others with integrity and authenticity?

Notes to the Teacher

The power of *Big Sonia* is that Sonia Warshawski is able to tell her story, and no one can tell it as she can. All societies rely on oral tradition to hold on to the histories of their people in their lifetimes, but more important, oral tradition is passed down so that our histories live on beyond those present during a given time period. Griots, elders, and others entrusted to carry oral histories often wear the responsibility like a badge of honor—with good reason. Whether it be early iron societies in West Africa or modern families in the American South, we connect with one another when we share stories, especially when we place ourselves within historical context. It helps for students to see themselves and others as primary sources, as people who have valid experiences and histories to offer to the world. Sonia was able to connect with the students in the documentary on a very deep level, and your students will have the opportunity to do the same with someone they know personally but whose history may surprise them.

In this lesson, students begin by examining the elements of oral tradition and testimony. Part 1 of the lesson relies heavily on the IWitness archive at USC (<https://iwitness.usc.edu/SFI/>), which will require you to create an educator account prior to the start of the lesson. You should use your school email to set up your account to gain access to the full range of resources that the website has to offer. Once you have your account set up, you will want to watch the “What is IWitness” video on the homepage just to acclimate yourself to the project. You should also view several testimonies and choose which 2–4 video testimonies you will show in class. Some categories to begin with are *family*, *fear*, *human rights*, *hate*, *justice*, *religion*, and *racism*. Remember that for each

video you decide to show, each student will need a separate copy of the accompanying graphic organizer **LOCATING AND ANALYZING TEXTUAL EVIDENCE** from https://assets.ctfassets.net/r2fjqekz37jz/LlxbgoAr8n665gtA8UFEC/foo47767160d753dd5085659b8f92b11/GO_Locating_and_Analyzing_Textual_Evidence.pdf to complete.

Part 2 of this lesson prepares your students to conduct a great interview so that they get information that will help them complete their reports later. They first review resources to help them understand the best elements of good interview preparation and execution, as well as the depth that is required when writing interview questions. This is a time when your presence and availability to provide guidance are critical. Some additional resources for you to review are below:

<https://blog.enwoven.com/home/2016/5/23/how-to-interview-others-to-capture-their-life-stories>

<https://blog.ted.com/5-tips-for-conducting-an-interview-with-someone-you-care-about/>

<https://liveboldandbloom.com/10/mindfulness/questions-to-ask-people>

<https://storycorps.org/participate/great-questions/>

Part 3 of this lesson consists of having the students piece together the information gathered in their interviews and produce reports on their subjects' greatest challenges. It is likely that this will take more than one class period because it is important to give students the opportunity to review the audio from the interview to pull pieces that resonate with them and to reflect on the significance of the oral history they have been told. Additionally, students should not feel rushed when writing thoughtful and engaging reports on their subjects. It is all right if some students do not want to use **HANDOUT 2:**

MASTERING THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE because their time spent with their subject may have been so impactful that they decide to take a different route for their write-up.

Because this lesson requires students to reach out to a family member, family friend, or community member and to schedule an interview time, it will be important to give students enough notice and time to solidify their subjects and times to meet. If two nights do not provide enough time, you may want to think about announcing the general assignment a week before the lesson begins or perhaps over a weekend.

While watching *Big Sonia* and throughout this lesson, it will be very important for you to regularly check in with your students about the pulse of the class as a whole so that you are in tune with where they are emotionally. These topics are challenging to process and teachers must be prepared to strike a balance between supporting a student through sharing something difficult and not pressuring students to share what they are not ready to.

Lesson

(SOCIAL STUDIES, ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS)



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COMMON CORE STANDARDS ADDRESSED BY THIS LESSON

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4

Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.1.D

Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.2.B

Develop the topic with well-chosen, relevant, and sufficient facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples appropriate to the audience's knowledge of the topic.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.6

Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology's capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically.

Duration of lesson

3 or 4 class periods

Assessments

Completion of iWitness Archives graphic organizers

Completion of **HANDOUTS 1** and **2**

Completion of interview write-up

Materials

HANDOUT 1: PREPARING TO COLLECT A PERSONAL NARRATIVE

HANDOUT 2: MASTERING THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Access to laptops, tablets, or other electronic devices for writing

Access to personal smartphones or recording devices to conduct interviews

Access to the following online sources:

- “The Lasting Power of Oral Traditions” at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/jul/29/lasting-power-oral-tradition>
- The iWitness Archive at USC website at <https://iwitness.usc.edu/SFI/> including the “Locating and Analyzing Textual Evidence” graphic organizer download
- “Katie Couric on how to conduct a good interview” at <https://youtu.be/4eOynrlzeTM>
- “Life Interview Questions” at <http://www.legacyproject.org/guides/lifeintquestions.html>
- “Life Interview Tips” at <http://www.legacyproject.org/guides/lifeinttips.html>
- “Life Interview Sample Questions” at <http://www.legacyproject.org/guides/lifeintquestions.pdf>
- iWitness graphic organizers at <https://iwitness.usc.edu/educatorresources#resources>

Procedure

Part 1: What Is Oral History?

1. The day before the lesson, inform students that they will be required to interview an older person about a difficult experience in that person's life, so they should begin thinking about whom they might interview and solidify that person's availability in the coming days. Additionally, instruct students to read and take notes on the article "The Lasting Power of Oral Traditions" at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/jul/29/lasting-power-oral-tradition> in preparation for the lesson.
2. On the day of the lesson, ask students to recall the brief article they read the previous evening. Ask students to share what information they learned from the article and what questions they have about oral tradition, storytelling, and primary sources.
3. As a class, watch the "What Is Testimony?" video found on the Dashboard on the homepage of the IWitness archive at USC <https://iewitness.usc.edu/SFI/>. Ask students to draw connections between testimony and history. Why are testimonies important? Why is oral history important? What is the significance of Sonia Warshawski telling her story?
4. Go to the "Watch" tab on the IWitness archive and cue up 2-4 videos to show and discuss, depending on the amount of time available.
5. Distribute several copies of the **LOCATING AND ANALYZING TEXTUAL EVIDENCE** graphic organizer found on the IWitness archive website and instruct students to watch each video that you show, paying close attention to the

elements listed on the graphic organizer. After each video, give students time to reflect silently and to complete the graphic organizer; then allow them to pair up and debrief about their reactions, thoughts, and responses to the worksheet questions.

6. After allowing students to view a few of the testimonies and discuss them with their partners, discuss the following as a class: What made these stories compelling? What historical context did you need to know in order to fully understand each testimony? How did the stories shift your perspective? How important is oral history?
7. For homework, students should solidify their interview plans. They should try to set aside 1-2 hours for the interview.

Part 2: Preparing to Collect a Personal Narrative

1. Begin by asking students whom they have chosen to interview for the assignment.
2. Explain to students that the person conducting the interview is just as important as the person being interviewed and that preparation makes for the most successful collection of stories. Show the short video of Katie Couric explaining how to conduct a good interview at <https://youtu.be/4eOynrl2eTM> and review the following webpages from the Legacy Project on conducting life history interviews:
 - A. <http://www.legacyproject.org/guides/lifeintquestions.html>
 - B. <http://www.legacyproject.org/guides/lifeinttips.html>
 - C. <http://www.legacyproject.org/guides/lifeintquestions.pdf>
3. Using this information as a framework for the students, distribute **HANDOUT 1: PREPARING TO COLLECT A PERSONAL**



NARRATIVE and instruct students to complete the handout in order to prepare for the interview. Be sure to check in with all students while they are working independently to make sure they are on the right track.

4. Use the time at the end of the class period to have students pair up and exchange feedback on their interview questions.
5. For homework, students must conduct their interviews. Urge students to record the interviews (with the permission of their subjects) so that they can be fully present as an interviewer instead of worrying about writing everything down.

Part 3: Capturing Someone Else's Voice in Narrative Writing

1. Begin class by checking in with students about how their interviews went. How are they feeling? How did the process go? Did they remember to bring a recording to class? Did they learn something new about someone they've known for a long time?
2. Ask students to think about the responsibility of collecting someone else's story for the purpose of sharing it with integrity and authenticity. What makes the IWitness archive so successful? What characteristics make up a great biography or written narrative? Distribute **HANDOUT 2: MASTERING THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE** to help students organize their long audio interviews into a manageable writing piece.
3. Give students the class period to write up the results of their interview using a narrative structure. They should

provide a thoughtful title as well. (This may take two class periods if you sense your students need more time to produce thoughtful work.) Reports will probably range from 3-5 pages.

4. As students complete the assignment, they should submit their written pieces with their audio recordings.
5. Conclude by suggesting that students may wish to do additional legacy audio or filming of their elderly relatives to preserve the family narrative and values as the director of *Big Sonia* did.

Extension Activity: What Is Your Story?

Creating a Vlog

A vlog is like a blog, but the story is captured on video. There are numerous websites online that provide tips on creating a vlog.

1. Allow students to reflect on their own life experiences and create a vlog responding to the following questions:
 - A. What oral history can you share based on your experiences?
 - B. What has happened in your lifetime that you can speak about as a primary source?
 - C. How did you overcome a challenging time in your life?
2. Watch each vlog as a class and discuss the similarities and differences of multiple stories from the same time period by people who are the same age.



Handout 1 ► P. 1

Preparing to Collect a Personal Narrative

Student name: _____ Date _____

Who is your interview subject?

What is your relationship to your subject? How do you know this person?

What time period and location will be the focus of the interview?

During this time period, what major events defined the era?

What were characteristics of the time period with respect to the following:

Politics	Economy	Culture	Environment
Equality	Industrialization	Geography/Climate	Technology

**Handout 1 ► P. 2**

Preparing to Collect a Personal Narrative

Given your understanding of the time period and what it takes to be a good interviewer, write a minimum of 15 open-ended and tactful interview questions. Remember that the purpose of the interview is to better understand a challenging time in your subject's life and if and how he or she overcame the challenge.

Be prepared to ask follow-up questions during the interview as well. Obviously, you can't plan these ahead of time, but must think of them quickly during the interview. Again, try to make them open-ended and tactful.

You may or may not have the opportunity to ask all of your questions during the interview. However, it is far better to have too many questions than not enough.

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Lesson

(SOCIAL STUDIES, ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS)



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Handout 2 ► P. 1

Mastering the Narrative Structure

Student name: _____ Date _____

“Brain Dump” of Initial Thoughts:

Lesson

(SOCIAL STUDIES, ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS)



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Handout 2 ► P. 2

Mastering the Narrative Structure

Set the scene. Who is the center of this story? When did it occur? Where? (Be very descriptive.)

What things led up to the resolution or overcoming the challenge?

How and when did your subject know the challenge had been overcome?

What impact did these experiences have on your subject? On you?

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