

Getting to Know the Real Sonia



# 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  
CO-EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS CLAUDE & BERTINA THAU & NICCOLE STARK | ASSOCIATE PRODUCER SARA LYNN WRIGHT | STORY PRODUCER & CONSULTING EDITOR ERIC FRITH | DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY TODD SOLIDAY | FILM EDITOR TODD SOLIDAY  
ADDITIONAL EDITOR DOUG LOVISEKA | ANIMATOR DAWN NORTON | GRAPHIC DESIGN & ILLUSTRATION RACHEL KNOTOFSKY | COLOR & FINISHING SERVICES BY LIGHTPRESS | POST-PRODUCTION SOUND SERVICES BY SKYWALKER SOUND



JOURNEYS IN FILM  
educating for global understanding



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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.<sup>1</sup> 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

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



## Getting to Know the Real Sonia

### Enduring Understandings

- One person has the potential to affect the lives of many others.
- Great suffering can have an indelible effect on a person's character and choices.
- Getting to know someone is a complex process that involves listening, observation, and thought.
- People tend to respond positively to courage, honesty, and love.
- People who go through terrible experiences can move forward to meaningful and purposeful lives.

### Essential Questions

- What are Sonia's most notable personality and character traits?
- Why does Sonia share her painful experiences during the Holocaust instead of trying to forget them?
- Why do so many diverse people respond to Sonia with appreciation and affection?
- How can viewing and discussing *Big Sonia* affect an individual's life?
- How can a person who experiences great suffering at the hands of others move forward though life without despair or bitterness?

### Notes to the Teacher:

Audiences of *Big Sonia* have an opportunity to meet and understand a remarkable and complex person. Sonia Warshawski's nine decades of life, as they are reflected in the movie, reveal a far-from-easy past: loss of family and experiences of human cruelty during the Holocaust; the struggle after World War II and liberation from Auschwitz to go on with life and raise a family in the United States; her husband's debilitating illnesses and death; hearing people deny the very realities to which she was a witness as a teenager; the impending loss of the tailor shop that has become an anchor in her life.

As Sonia says, she has been damaged by things that have happened, but this very fact seems to connect her in deep ways with the small and large groups with whom she interacts and with members of the film audience. (Who has not been damaged by life experiences? Who has not faced the challenge to go on?) Despite the damage, what we see in Sonia is a person who is remarkably whole: honest, compassionate, humble, purposeful, creative, friendly, and resilient.

*Big Sonia* is a documentary, which makes it different from other types of movie experiences. Unlike fictional films and docudramas, documentaries are bound to facts. The Academy Award criteria for documentary nominations emphasize factual accuracy as well as theatrical and creative excellence. Documentaries allow for great latitude in directorial choices, including juxtaposition of reenactments, animation, and interviews with real-life footage.<sup>1</sup> For many students this type of film is relatively new territory requiring discussion before they can comfortably get into the film as a whole. (Note:

<sup>1</sup> [www.oscars.org/oscars/rules-eligibility](http://www.oscars.org/oscars/rules-eligibility)



Lesson 4 of this guide engages students in a detailed analysis of the complex processes involved in creating *Big Sonia*.)

The first part of this lesson uses the movie's trailer to accomplish this purpose. **HANDOUT 1** helps students to anticipate ways *Big Sonia* enables viewers to listen in on Sonia in various contexts, to observe her at work in the tailor shop, to view animation about the Holocaust, to glimpse aspects of Sonia's rich post-Holocaust family life, and to hear how people respond to her. Students discuss the challenges involved in making a good documentary; the assessment activity involves planning elements of an original documentary. This assignment promotes active viewing of the choices made in the documentary to characterize Sonia. (Note: The activity also lays a foundation for Lesson 3, which leads students to development of an oral history.) By the conclusion of Part 1, students are ready to truly get to know her.

Part 2 involves viewing the entire film, which takes about an hour and a half. You will probably want to stop it occasionally to allow students to ask questions, make clarifications, and answer the questions on **HANDOUT 2**. After discussing the handout, which garners first impressions and understandings of Sonia's personality and experiences, student groups focus attention on understanding and reaching conclusions based on specific elements emphasized in the documentary: John's Tailor Shop; interview settings; family and personal friends; Sonia's meeting with the small group of students; her session with the prison inmates; her words and responses when she talks about the Holocaust. Groups' presentations provide a useful assessment tool. By the conclusion of this section

of the lesson, students should have a growing awareness of personal characteristics stressed in the documentary: courage, strength, resilience, love, purposefulness, compassion, and cheerfulness.

Part 3 begins with a look at "The Optimist Creed," which was written over a hundred years ago by Christian D. Larson and which is displayed prominently in the tailor shop. Students reflect on ways Sonia's life reflects elements of the creed. They consider ways we get to know other people and identify specific traits they see in Sonia, as well as evidence to substantiate those traits. You will want to emphasize careful word choices with attention to nuances in denotation and connotation. (For example, *resilient* and *flexible* are near-synonyms, but the first suggests a strength not necessarily conveyed by the second.) Finally, students choose among options for a culminating writing assignment.

This lesson is very thorough. If time is short, feel free to adapt the activities as needed.

**COMMON CORE STANDARDS ADDRESSED BY THIS LESSON****CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1**

Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.2**

Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually quantitatively, and orally.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.4**

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

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.2**

Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1**

Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text. (Note: In this case, the movie itself is the primary text.)

**Duration of the Lesson**

Approximately five or six class periods

**Assessments**

Completion of **HANDOUTS 1, 2, 3, and 5**

Completion of an original documentary plan (Part 1)

Participation in group presentation (Part 2)

Completion of summative writing assignment (Part 3)

Evidence of active viewing of the trailer and the movie

Participation in class discussion

**Materials**

Videos of *Big Sonia* and of the movie's trailer

Copies of **HANDOUTS 1** through **6** for each student

Optional: Poster displaying "The Optimist's Creed" (available through sources such as Amazon)

**Procedure****Part 1: Beginning *Big Sonia***

1. Start the class by explaining that students are going to view a movie about a Holocaust survivor. Explore briefly what this term means. How old would a Holocaust survivor be today? Point out that the number of intervening decades means that the number of survivors is constantly diminishing.

2. Explain that students will first view the movie's trailer (about 2 minutes long), which you will show several times. Before starting the trailer, distribute **HANDOUT 1** and review the questions. Then show the trailer at <https://bigsonia.com/trailer-media>.
3. After students have viewed the trailer and completed the handout, conduct a discussion based on their answers.

Suggested Responses:

- A. The title frame may seem ambiguous, even fanciful. Who is Sonia? Is she big? Why is the frame embellished with flowers?
- B. Scenes juxtapose Sonia at work at the tailor shop, her being interviewed and speaking with audiences, animated sequences about the Holocaust experiences, and others speaking about Sonia.
- C. We see an outgoing and friendly person who is willing to talk about her terrible experiences decades ago. She is given to colorful clothing. We also see firm determination, resilience, and the choice to live a purposeful working life long after the age when most people have retired.
- D. The film is probably intended to acquaint audiences with Sonia and to inspire responses, perhaps of admiration or emulation.
- E. For example, how are all of the people in the trailer connected? What is going on at the shop? Why does Sonia persist in talking about painful memories?
- F. Quotations from the trailer:
  - In the first quote, we seem to be overhearing Sonia during an interview. She seems to be talking about the Holocaust and the impossibility of forgetting what happened. Many people can identify with the

experience of powerful events that become indelible memories.

- In the second quote, we again listen in as Sonia describes one of her coping strategies--keeping active and busy, not just dwelling on the past.
  - The third quote comments on her purpose in the speaking engagements--an effort to connect with others and touch their hearts.
  - The fourth quote shares a response of someone who has listened to Sonia. In truth, most people have "been through something" and appreciate others' compassion and understanding.
4. Explain that *Big Sonia* is a documentary, meaning that it is nonfiction in all of its elements, but that it is also theatrical and creative. A person making a documentary faces the challenge of combining elements to convey reality. Ask students to consider possibilities for several documentary topics and elements that might be included in creating a film about them. For example:
    - The Battle of Gettysburg (film sequences from Civil War reenactments; images of newspaper articles from the mid-1800s; interviews with historians)
    - The assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., or another prominent person (interviews with eyewitnesses; TV news clips; video of the person addressing an audience or responding to interview questions)
  5. Tell students that Sonia's granddaughter Leah Warshawski produced and directed the film *Big Sonia*. She was in a unique position to gather materials, create film ideas, and present the subject matter in a theatrical manner.



6. Ask students to select a person they know well and also admire as a topic for a possible documentary. Assign short essays or oral presentations in which they identify the person, explain reasons for choosing this person, and describe three distinct approaches they would use in the project. If necessary, provide examples of topics, such as a relative who has dealt with a serious medical challenge, someone who has endured a traumatic event, or someone who has worked to address a significant local issue. What footage of the person in action would be appropriate? Would reenactment be helpful? What persons might be interviewed? Would photographs, home movies, letters, or diary entries help?
7. When these decisions have been completed and recorded, have students share their writings or presentations. Close with discussion of the following questions:
  - What sorts of techniques do you find most interesting as ways to convey an understanding of a person?
  - What can make it difficult to convey that understanding?
  - What do you expect to find when you view the entire film about Sonia Warshawski?
2. Before starting the film, distribute **HANDOUT 2: ACTIVE VIEWING OF *Big Sonia*** and review the questions. You may want to pause the film at the following moments:
  - A. about ten minutes in, when Sonia says, “I was fourteen.”
  - B. after she says, “So I am damaged—there is no doubt about it.”
  - C. after her meeting with the small group of students.
  - D. after her son breaks down while trying to read aloud a poem he wrote years ago.
3. Encourage students to feel free to ask you to stop the film or replay sections along the way to ask questions and make clarifications.
4. When students have seen the film and completed the handout, conduct a general discussion based on responses.

#### *Suggested Responses*

- A. *Cheerful, work-oriented, friendly, compassionate, creative, honest, etc.*
- B. *It seems as if everyone Sonia meets is important to her. Among these are her children Regina, Morrie, and Debbie, and her granddaughter Leah, but also others she meets in a variety of situations, including work at the tailor shop, speaking engagements and even grocery-shopping.*
- C. *She is, of course, busy with work and customers in the tailor shop, as well as with public speaking commitments. She spends time and attention on her personal appearance. She likes to draw and make flower arrangements.*
- D. *Many people seem to feel that they can connect with Sonia in a significant way. They seem to sense genuine integrity, openness, and compassion.*

### **Part 2: Getting to Know Sonia Better**

1. Point out that the trailer has prepared students for the many ways the film presents Sonia. After thinking about ways they could depict a person in an original documentary, students are in a position to view *Big Sonia* with active and discerning minds.

- E. Examples might include the John's Tailor Shop sign, flower arrangements, the tattoo on Sonia's arm; the tattered remnants of her mother's scarf, photographs, vivid fabrics, and the "whatever" pillow.
  - F. There are numerous possibilities, including, for example, the comment from the prison inmate about strength and physical size.
4. Ask students to explain how we learn about characters from a film. (Their appearance, their facial expressions, what they say, what they do, what others say about them.) Tell students that they are going to look at some lines from the film that tell about Sonia. Distribute copies of **HANDOUT 3**. Do the first quotation on the handout together as a class and then have students work to identify the speakers and explain their contributions to our knowledge of Sonia.

#### *Suggested Responses*

- 1. Sonia expresses this idea, amazement that she somehow survived, more than once in the course of the movie.
- 2. Sonia expresses an understanding that terrible experiences can have lasting effects, among them chronic fear.
- 3. Caroline voices this during Sonia's meeting with the small group of students, voicing a reaction shared by many who hear her story.
- 4. This statement from Sonia is central to her entire message. While she admits that forgiveness is beyond her capacity, she rejects hatred as a response.
- 5. Sonia's son Morrie says this about her. Like his sisters, he is aware that growing up the child of Holocaust survivors had its own set of challenges and limitations.
- 6. Sonia remembers this advice from her mother; the idea is that self-pity in a difficult circumstance leads nowhere, and a change in perspective on the situation is necessary.

- 7. This quote from one of the prison inmates links directly to the film's title and the idea of tiny Sonia as an incredibly big and strong person.
  - 8. This comment from SuEllen Fried, the woman who connected Sonia with the prisoners, means that others, like Sonia, can move past painful experiences to live purposeful lives.
  - 9. Olivia, the young girl whose essay about Sonia won first prize, articulates one of the film's central messages about connecting with and understanding people.
  - 10. This tribute from a customer at the tailor shop reflects the respect and admiration Sonia evokes from many people.)
5. Remind the class that many aspects of a film contribute to our understanding of the characters. Divide the class into small groups, and assign each group one of the following topics:
- A. John's Tailor Shop
  - B. interview settings
  - C. family and personal friends
  - D. Sonia's meeting with the students
  - E. the session with the prison inmates
  - F. Sonia's words and memories about the Holocaust.

Explain that each group is to focus intensively on sections of the movie that deal with the assigned topic for detailed analysis of what is conveyed about Sonia. Direct the groups to select one brief clip (no more than 2 or 3 minutes) and to prepare to present that as well as their conclusions to the class as a whole. (Note: This activity will be most effective if groups have access to the film so that they can fast-forward to



and closely examine the scenes most directly related to their assigned topic.)

**6.** Have groups complete presentations. Among a wide variety of possible conclusions are the following:

- A.** John's Tailor Shop: For Sonia, the shop has been a long-term place for purposeful and creative work as well as meaningful connections with others. It shows her love for colors, for fabrics, and for flowers. It is a place for the busyness she values as a way to avoid focusing too much on negative events. The shop sequences also show the powerful impact that Sonia has on others' lives. The relocation of the shop at the end echoes the film's theme that life can go on after setbacks.
- B.** The interview settings: A little nervousness, even about unfamiliar technology, does not deter Sonia from her purpose. Her answers reflect both heart and mind connections, as well as honesty and humility. She makes an effort to look her best, too, and she treats the interviewer with courtesy and respect.
- C.** Family and personal friends: After the war, Sonia went on to a successful marriage and raised three children (Regina, Morrie, and Debbie) to become likable and responsible adults who have tremendous respect for her. It is evident that consequences of the Holocaust lingered in their childhood home, among them fear, sorrow, and an awareness that really terrible things can happen. In Sonia's case, this made her a somewhat demanding mother, and probably one with little tolerance for petty foolishness. Family is clearly a central value.
- D.** Sonia's meeting with the students: Sonia seems to know and understand that the young people also have individual sufferings and relational ties that matter as

much as her own. Her main concerns seem to be to connect with them compassionately and to encourage them to stand up and speak out for what is right, to believe that one person can have an impact, make a difference. The movie stresses her lasting impact on Caroline.

- e.** The session with the prison inmates: Sonia meets them with the respect and openness we see between her and everyone else, and they seem to connect with her because of the sense that she, too, "has been through something." The fact that she has come through not unscathed, but nonetheless certainly alive and successful, is encouraging. The Optimist Creed is a link between Sonia and this particular group.
- f.** Words and responses about the Holocaust: Sonia tries to relate these in a somewhat factual manner and with tight emotional control. Even seven decades of time have not been enough to make this easy. She does not claim the power to forgive but refuses to harbor hatred. She sees herself as a witness obligated to attest to what she has seen, heard, and experienced. This is a concept also included in the poem her son Morrie wrote long ago.

### **Part 3: Understanding and Responding to Sonia**

- 1.** Remind students of the question the newspaper reporter asked Sonia when the tailor shop was being closed. Ask how she responded to the question about how she could deal with so many losses. (She pointed out a prominent display of "The Optimist Creed.") Ask students to define



the word *optimist*. (An optimist is a person who expects and believes the best, who sees a glass as half-full rather than half-empty.) Then ask students to define the word *creed*. (A creed is an articulation of fundamental beliefs.) [Note: This is a good opportunity to explore two important Latin language roots of English: *optimus*, meaning “best” and *credo*, meaning “I believe.” Some other English vocabulary words stemming from them are “optimize,” “suboptimal,” “credible,” “incredulous,” and “credential.”]

2. Distribute **HANDOUT 4: THE OPTIMIST CREED**, project it on a screen, or direct students’ attention to a poster of the creed displayed in the classroom. Have volunteers read each of the tenets aloud. Discuss each tenet as you work through the list.
3. Ask students, working individually or with partners, to select one tenet and apply it to Sonia as she is depicted at a specific moment in the film. Follow with a general pooling of observations and conclusions. (For example, Sonia is strong enough not to lose her equilibrium at the prospect of losing the tailor shop. She meets each customer with a cheerful greeting and a smile.)
4. Remind students that they have considered how character is conveyed in film. Ask students to brainstorm ways we get to know people in real life. (We listen to what they say, both in words and in body language, about what they think and feel; we observe what they do and what they avoid doing. We talk with them and also hear what others have to say. Getting to know someone well takes time.)
5. Point out that *Big Sonia* lets us get to know Sonia through all of these ways, and the time factor is accomplished through the voices of people, including Vernon at the mall,

who have known her for many years. Through the activities in Part 2 of this lesson, students have heard Sonia speak about her life and thoughts; they have seen her struggling for control as she tells her story and also cheerfully and affectionately greeting people; they have heard her children speak about her; they have witnessed her impact on diverse individuals.

6. Have the class brainstorm a list of character and personality traits they see in Sonia and record them on the board. Encourage careful and precise word choices. (Examples: courage, compassion, commitment, resilience, friendliness, diligence, truthfulness, gratitude, loyalty, love, purposefulness, cheerfulness.)
7. Distribute **HANDOUT 5: SONIA WARSHAWSKI’S MOST IMPORTANT TRAITS**, and have students complete it individually. When they have finished, have them post results on the walls around the room and invite them to walk around to view others’ responses. Use the handouts as evaluation tools, considering both the traits selected and evidence from the film.
8. Distribute **HANDOUT 6: CULMINATING CHARACTER ASSIGNMENT** to explain options for the final writing assignment. Establish a day for peer conferencing and a final due date.



## Handout 1 ► P. 1

A First Encounter with *Big Sonia***Directions:**

Carefully view the trailer for the film and answer the following questions.

1. What responses do the film's title and the images around it evoke?

2. What diverse kinds of scenes does the trailer suggest? Which of those interest you the most?

3. What are your initial observations about Sonia's personality?

4. Judging from the trailer, what do you think is the purpose of the movie as a whole?



## Handout 1 ► P. 2

A First Encounter with *Big Sonia*

5. What questions does the trailer leave in your mind?

6. Read the following quotations from the film. Who are the speakers? What do they mean? Do you agree?

“You live with it all your life, and you can never forget.”

“I keep myself always busy and this helps me not to think so much about it.”

“If I reach one heart, I accomplish something.”

“It takes people who have been through something to reach people who are going through something.”



## Handout 2

Active Viewing of *Big Sonia*

**Directions:** As you view the movie, take notes on the following questions.

1. What personal characteristics seem to you to be most prominent in Sonia's personality and motivation?

2. Who are the people that seem most important to her?

3. With what activities does she fill her life?

4. How do other people respond to her? Why?

5. What objects and images does the film stress in connection with Sonia? Why?

6. Jot down two or three quotes by or about Sonia that seem particularly significant. What do they mean to you?



## Handout 3 ► P. 1

## Learning about Sonia by Listening

**Directions:** The following quotations are presented in the same order as they occur in the movie. For each, identify the speaker and explain how the quotation illuminates the character of Sonia Warshawski.

“How I made it—it was a miracle.”

“When you have such horrible experiences as a youngster—it left a fear.”

“I just respect you so much.”

“But I will not hate because the hate will destroy me, and I will be a hater like them.”

“On the one hand, she is a woman who is very, very loving, but she is also very demanding.”



## Handout 3 ► P. 2

## Learning about Sonia by Listening

“Remember: Whenever you are down, look more down and you will be on top.”

“Strong things don’t come in the biggest packages. It can be very small, but incredibly strong.”

“No matter what has happened to you, it does not have to be a defining experience of your life.”

“I believe the connections Sonia Warshawski makes with all people from all generations can teach us to understand each other better.”

“She’s a Kansas City treasure.”





## Handout 4

## The Optimist Creed

**Directions:**

This poem was written over a century ago by Charles D. Larson. As you read it, consider both your own responses and ways it connects to *Big Sonia*.

Promise Yourself . . .

To be so strong that nothing can disturb your peace of mind.

To talk health, happiness, and prosperity to every person you meet.

To make all your friends feel that there is something worthwhile in them.

To look at the sunny side of everything and make your optimism come true.

To think only of the best, to work only for the best and to expect only the best.

To be just as enthusiastic about the success of others as you are about your own.

To forget the mistakes of the past and press on to the greater achievements of the future.

To wear a cheerful expression at all times and give a smile to every living creature you meet.

To give so much time to improving yourself that you have no time to criticize others.

To be far too large for worry, too noble for anger, too strong for fear, and too happy to permit the presence of trouble.

To think well of yourself and to proclaim this fact to the world, not in loud word, but in great deeds.

To live in the faith that the whole world is on your side, so long as you are true to the best that is in you.

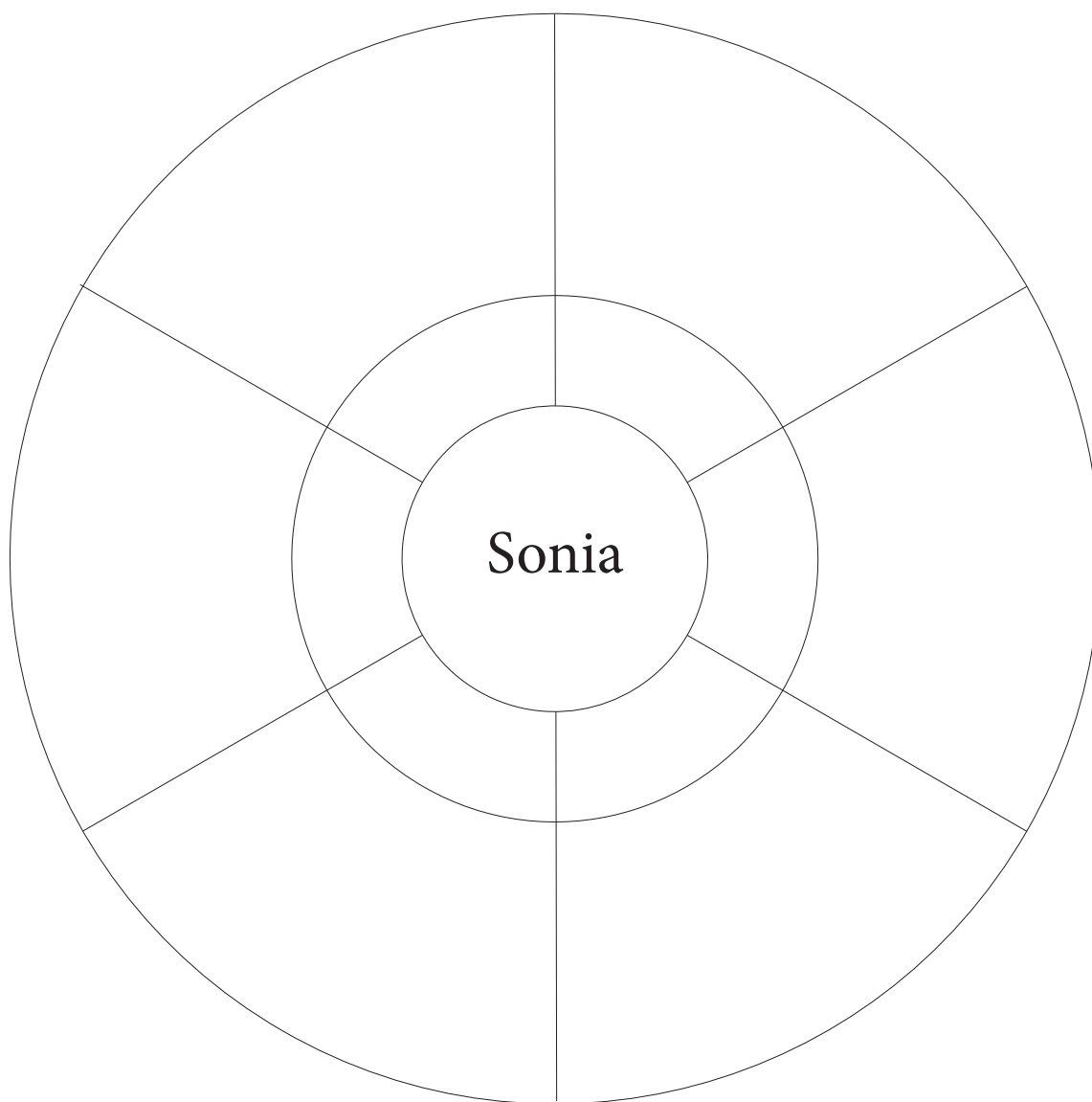


## Handout 5

# Sonia Warshawski's Most Important Traits

**Directions:**

Use this graphic organizer to identify six of Sonia's character or personality traits that you find most important or interesting. Using careful and precise word choices, write each trait in a space in the inner ring. In the outer ring, cite a specific moment in the film in which that trait is evident.





## Handout 6

## Culminating Character Assignment

**Directions:**

Wrap up your consideration of the character of Sonia with one of the following writing assignments.

1. Write an essay in which you discuss what you see as Sonia's most impactful or impressive character trait(s). Be sure to include both evidence from the film and why you consider it/them so important.
2. Write a script for a drama in which Sonia speaks with a specific group such as members of Alateen, refugees or immigrants detained at a border, or a support group for people struggling with a family member's experience of Parkinson's Disease or street violence. Make sure that Sonia's voice in your script is consistent with her voice in *Big Sonia*.
3. Write an essay in which you analyze Sonia's character as it is evident in one limited arena of her life, for example, at the tailor shop, as a wife and mother, as an activist for Holocaust awareness, as a child in the 1940s, or her care for herself as a woman in the closing years of her life.
4. Select several objects or images that seem important to the character presentation in the film and explain what they show about Sonia's personality and motivation.
5. Write and deliver a speech about your perspectives on how learning about Sonia Warshawski, an elderly woman in Kansas City, can touch a person's mind and heart and lead to action.
6. Write a series of letters to Sonia in which you respond to what she says or does or to what others say about her at five specific moments in the documentary.

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Journeys in Film  
PO Box 65357  
Albuquerque, NM 87193  
[www.journeysinfilm.org](http://www.journeysinfilm.org)