

MEDIA IMPACT FUNDERS

2017 Media Impact Festival Case Study: *For Ahkeem* forahkeemfilm.com

Film synopsis:

Beginning one year before the fatal police shooting of a black teenager in nearby Ferguson, Missouri, *For Ahkeem* is the coming-of-age story of Daje Shelton, a black 17-year-old girl in North St. Louis. She fights for her future as she is placed in an alternative high school and navigates marginalized neighborhoods, biased criminal justice policies and economic devastation. Over two years, we watch as Daje struggles to maintain focus in school, attends the funerals of friends killed around her, falls in love with a classmate named Antonio, and navigates a loving-but-tumultuous relationship with her mother. As events in Ferguson just four miles from her home seize the national spotlight, Daje learns she is pregnant.

Production Team:

- Jeremy S. Levine and Landon Van Soest, Directors
- Iyabo Boyd, Producer
- Nicholas Weissman, Producer/Cinematographer
- Jeff Truesdell, Executive Producer
- Lily Henderson, Editor
- Brad Rayford, Field Producer

Funders:

Sundance Documentary Fund, ITVS, IDA Pare Lorentz Documentary Fund, Filmmakers Fund, New York State Council for the Arts (NYSCA), San Francisco Film Society Documentary Film Fund, Fork Films, Ford Foundation JustFilms, St. Louis Community Foundation, Park Foundation, Hawkins Foundation, Alex Shiva, Barbara Dobkin.

Issues addressed in film:

For Ahkeem views institutional bias, juvenile justice and education through Daje's first-person perspective and offers a vital entry point to consider social policies that have increasingly pushed children—especially minorities—out of school and into the criminal justice system.

Target audience:

In addition to reaching the general public, who is eager to discuss the varied elements of the Black Lives Matter movement, the impact campaign behind *For Ahkeem* aims to:

- Educate teachers and parents on how disciplinary policies in elementary schools are often biased and serve as an entry point for the school-to-prison pipeline;
- Inspire teenagers to be better informed about the juvenile and criminal justice systems; and
- Engage the legal community that works on the front lines of the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems to influence legislators on two issues that greatly impact the

pipeline: harmful zero-tolerance disciplinary policies in schools, and raising the legal age at which minors can be tried as adults.

Impact goals:

The overarching goals of the impact campaign are to ultimately raise the age of criminal responsibility, reform school discipline policies and mental health services related to trauma and reduce juvenile incarceration rates.

Impact strategy:

Impact campaign activities include high school screenings to educate students about their rights in the juvenile justice system; a Washington, D.C., policy screening event to create discussion about the film and policy reform; educator and legislator consortium screenings in which the film will be used as a tool to visualize information and statistics and educate policymakers; and college and community screenings to encourage conversation and raise awareness about the prevalence of juvenile expulsion and detention due to zero tolerance policies.

This strategy will include partnering with Film Sprout—an education nonprofit that specializes in developing resources around documentary films—to create discussion guides and lesson plans aimed at engaging young people, challenging their perceptions about bias, and educating them about their rights in the justice system. This guide will be used at engagement screenings in New York City—where *For Ahkeem* is serving as the pilot for a new community engagement effort—as well as in Washington, D.C., and St. Louis, MO, and in high schools, colleges and community groups across the country. The Film Sprout impact team will reach critical audiences in low-income high schools who otherwise might not have the financial means to access the film.

To reach policymakers, the campaign will host a targeted screening in Washington, D.C., arranged in partnership with the Alliance for Excellence in Education (AEE). AEE will be organizing screenings for school superintendents and educators along with education non-profits around the country. The team is also working with the St. Louis County Courts to organize screenings for judges, litigators, and public defenders, and on targeted screenings coordinated with organizations that include the Advancement Project, ACLU, Urban Institute, and the NAACP.

Impact so far:

The team is in the early stages of the impact campaign. They have held events including a powerful one with the Tribeca Film Institute to screen *For Ahkeem* for inmates at the medium-security adult correctional facility in New York. There, some in the all-male audience—many serving life sentences—were brought to tears. The team is currently looking to form new partnerships for additional screenings and events with groups including the Advancement Project, the Children’s Defense Fund, the Juvenile Law Center, Missouri Youth Services Institute. The Sentencing Project, Raise the Age, and the Campaign for Youth Justice, the NAACP LDF, National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, and the Coalition for Juvenile Justice, The Ferguson Action and Black Lives Matter campaigns.

For Ahkeem screened at Sheffield DocFest, AFI Docs, the Nantucket Film Festival, Tribeca Film Festival, Hot Docs and more. It was awarded the Grand Jury Prize for Best Feature Documentary

at the Independent Film Festival Boston and a Special Jury Mention for Best International Film at the Doc Edge Film Festival in New Zealand.

Additional accolades include:

- Top 10 Lists in Entertainment Weekly (“Must List”) and People Magazine (“People Pick”)
- Daje Shelton named on the Cinema Eye Honors List of “Unforgettables” in 2017, subjects that “helped to define documentary cinema in 2017” –Anne Thompson, IndieWire
- Winner of nine film festival awards—including 7 “Best Feature Documentary” awards—and an official Selection of more than 50 film festivals and counting
- World Premiere, Berlin Film Festival, Nominated for Glashütte Original Documentary Award
- Official Selection, Tribeca Film Festival
- Official Selection, Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival
- Official Selection, Sheffield Doc/Fest
- Official Selection, AFI Docs
- Winner, Grand Jury Prize, Independent Film Festival Boston
- Winner, Best Documentary, Stockholm International Film Festival
- Winner, Best Feature Documentary, Indie Memphis Film Festival
- Winner, Best Feature Documentary, Tacoma Film Festival
- Winner, Best Feature Documentary, International Black Film Festival
- Winner, Best Feature Documentary, Santa Fe Independent Film Festival
- Winner, Outstanding Documentary Feature, Tallgrass Film Festival
- Winner, Midrash St. Louis Film Award, St. Louis International Film Festival
- Winner, Special Jury Mention, Doc Edge International Documentary Film Festival