

LET THE LITTLE LIGHT SHINE

A FILM BY KEVIN SHAW

A high-achieving elementary school in **Chicago's fastest growing neighborhood** is a lifeline for Black children—until gentrification threatens its closure.



Broadcast: POV PBS

Run Time: 82 minutes

Language: English

<https://www.lightshinefilm.com/>

Trailer: <https://vimeo.com/672573306>

Twitter - @LightShineDoc

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[Key Images](#) / [Poster](#)

SYNOPSIS

When a thriving, top-ranked African American elementary school is threatened to be closed and replaced by a new high school that favors the community's wealthier residents, parents, students and educators fight for the elementary school's survival.

Directed and Produced by Kevin Shaw

Produced by Rachel Dickson

Executive Producers Steve James, Sally Jo Fifer, Erika Dilday, Chris White, Leslie Fields Cruz

MORE ABOUT THE FILM

LET THE LITTLE LIGHT SHINE is about a high-performing, top-ranked African American elementary school, The National Teachers Academy (NTA) which is threatened to be closed and transformed into a high school favoring the needs of the community's wealthier residents. Parents, students, and educators mobilize to fight for the elementary school's survival.

The story follows everyday parents-turned-organizers alongside NTA students and staff as they advocate to keep their elementary school, which is a safe haven for children and a community bedrock in Chicago's fastest growing neighborhood - The South Loop.

The film also posits the point-of-view of residents in favor of changing NTA into a high school that is sorely needed for its neighborhood. The theme of gentrification is rarely viewed through this lens of education, where "well-intentions" are critically seen as privileged desires, creating a disconnect dividing and reshaping communities across the country.

Under-resourced schools across the United States have been closed due to underperformance, but LET THE LITTLE LIGHT SHINE tells a **unique story of a high performing school with a 100% graduation rate potentially being shuttered for the benefit of a higher social strata.**



PRAISE FOR THE FILM

“The world premiere of a sensationally effective Chicago documentary tore the roof clean off three different theaters at the 2022 True/False Film Fest.”

“At True/False, the nation’s most beloved nonfiction cinema showcase, director Kevin Shaw’s film delivered the visceral impact of all six “Rocky” movies and a couple of “Creed” films put together.”

"It’s a rousing tribute to grassroots activism.”

“In the film, the ardently pro-public school philanthropist Chance the Rapper — who was forbidden, he says on camera, to visit NTA for a school event, even though CPS had solicited his visits to other schools in other circumstances — talks about the NTA students’ qualities of serious, effective civic engagement. He uses three words to describe them: “Focused. Organized. Militant.” They all apply to this electric charge of a movie.”

– **Michael Phillips, *Chicago Tribune***

“Rousing.”

“A David vs. Goliath struggle that Shaw details with thrilling elan. Shaw was a segment director on Steve James’ excellent series *America to Me*—James serves as a producer here—and *Let The Little Light Shine* has the same ground-level feel for the racial dynamics of Chicago schools and the inspiring individuals willing to fight the good fight.”

– **Scott Tobias, *The Reveal***

"*Let the Little Light Shine*, from director Kevin Shaw, should stay with engaged True/False audiences for a very long time. The film does double duty: Shaw crafts a joyful portrait of a particularly warm and successful Chicago school, then introduces any number of question marks into conversations about race, education and gentrification. This is one of the strongest films about American education ever to play the festival.”

– **Aarik Danielsen, *Columbia Daily Tribune***

“Watching the determination and growing momentum to save a vital elementary school is as inspirational as it is electric, with scenes of daily activities in the school revealing the unsurpassed, supportive education taking place. The screening I attended, the first public one, was a landmark in my cinematic experiences, with the audience directly involved in every twist and turn, shouting, applauding, cheering, and talking back to the screen. Standing ovations that went on for minutes...”

– **Diane Carson, *Alliance of Women Film Journalists***

“Documentaries being what they are, one doesn’t normally worry about spoilers when writing about them. But Kevin Shaw’s *Let the Little Light Shine* ends with such a “power of filmmaking” bang that it’s a struggle not to lead with it.”

“Shaw’s ability to maintain a propulsive beat while making a movie that involves a fair number of school board meetings borders on the miraculous.”

“During its premiere at True/False, where it was chosen as the Show Me True/False honoree, “Little Light” regularly moved members of the audience to groans, gasps, cheers, tears and, finally, a standing ovation.”

– **Mary McNamara**, *Los Angeles Times*

Filmmaker Statements

I made this film to understand why there was a movement in a booming Chicago neighborhood to close a high-performing, top-ranked elementary school that serviced a majority Black student population and transform that institution into a high school, potentially causing more harm than good to neighborhood families. “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it,” the adage goes. Race, obviously and unfortunately, figured into the equation, but there were other factors at play – class, which is intertwined with race, gentrification, power, privilege, and politics all had a hand in creating discord amongst a community that wanted the same thing -- the best possible education for their children. The ways to achieve that goal was different for each set of residents, reminding us of harsh inequities and bias existing in our country. This story is not unique to Chicago; it is reflective of our American experience, one where Black and Brown communities still must fight for not only a seat at the table, but in this instance, an equitable place to learn.

- Kevin Shaw (Director/Producer)

When I first stepped in the halls of NTA, I knew it was a special place. I found a tightknit, cohesive community, students eager to learn, and supportive parents. As a Chicago Public School graduate, I knew this school was unique. We followed the story over the course of two years, and everyday in the school I felt extremely connected to the teachers and students and worried that this place would disappear. Being able to share this story is an honor and I hope people who see it are as impacted as I was when I met these incredible everyday heroes.

- Rachel Dickson (Producer)

Kevin Shaw’s Let the Little Light Shine shines a great deal of light on what’s going on in Chicago’s public school system. This is the story of a predominantly Black grammar school that’s doing everything right by its students, but has to fight for its life against the forces of bureaucracy and gentrification. Kevin’s film is not polemic. It is an incisive, thoughtful, and moving story of race and education that we’ve not seen before.

- Steve James (Executive Producer)

PRESS

[A tale of Chicago activism triumphs at True/False - Chicago Tribune](#)

[Column: Public school doc ‘Let the Little Light Shine’ excels - Los Angeles Times \(latimes.com\)](#)

[‘Let The Little Light Shine’ documentary follows the fight to save a public school to premiere in Chicago • The TRiiBE](#)

["Let the Little Light Shine" director Kevin Shaw on Chicago's NTA \(columbiatribune.com\)](#)

[True/False Returns With Spirited Response to Docus About Russia - Variety](#)

[Trading Spaces: Highlights From True/False 2022 \(substack.com\)](#)

[True/False 2022 Review: "Let the Little Light Shine" Offers a Radiant Portrait of Rebellion at an Elementary School Fighting for Its Future - The Moveable Fest](#)

[2022Doc10: 'Let the Little Light Shine' Illuminates at Doc10 \(hollywoodchicago.com\)](#)

[Small voices create huge inspiration at world premiere of 'Let the Little Light Shine' | The Maneater](#)

[True/False 2022 pulled viewers into true stories shared on screen \(columbiatribune.com\)](#)

[Five things to know about the newly released 2022 True/False Film Fest lineup - Columbia Tribune, Feb. 9, 2022](#)

Selected Festivals/Screenings:

True/False Film Fest (world premiere), March 4-6, 2022
SXSW EDU, March 7, 2022
Ashland Film Festival, April 1-10, 2022
Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, April 7-10, 2022
Milwaukee Film Festival, April 21- May 1, 2022
Detroit Freep Film Festival, April 27-May 1, 2022
North by North International Film Festival, April 27-May 1, 2022
AV Fest, April 29, May 1, 2022
Doclands Documentary Film Festival, May 1-5, 2022
Minneapolis, St. Paul International Film Festival, May 5-19, 2022
Doc 10 Film Festival, May 19-21, 2022
Southern Fried Filmworks, June 12, 2022
Rooftop Films, Brooklyn, NY, June 25, 2022
BlackStar Film Festival, August 3-7, 2022

Filmmakers

KEVIN SHAW - Director/Producer, Cinematographer, Editor

As a director, producer, cinematographer and editor, Kevin Shaw has created Emmy award-winning content for national television networks. Shaw was a segment director and cinematographer on **America to Me**, and cinematographer on **City So Real**, from Academy Award-nominated filmmaker Steve James, where they both debuted at the Sundance Film Festival and aired on Starz and Hulu respectively. Shaw's debut documentary, **The Street Stops Here**, premiered on PBS and ESPN to rave reviews. He won an Edward R. Murrow Award for

his short film about a quadriplegic trying to regain the ability to walk. Shaw is an alum of Kartemquin Films Diverse Voices in Documentary Fellowship and Academy Award-nominated filmmaker Stanley Nelson's Firelight Media Documentary Lab. He is a 2022 PBS Wyncotte Fellow.

Twitter - @kevinshaw23

IG - @kevinshaw23

FB - <https://www.facebook.com/kevin.shaw.165/>

RACHEL DICKSON - Producer

Rachel Dickson is an independent filmmaker with a background in journalism and Spanish translation. She produced '**63 Boycott**' with Kartemquin Films, which was named on the Academy Awards shortlist for Best Documentary Short Subject. Dickson was a field producer for **Hard Earned**, a Kartemquin Films production which won the Alfred I. DuPont-Columbia University Award. She was a 2021 Sundance Institute Creative Producing Fellow.

Twitter - @rachelsuzaa

IG - @rachelsuza

FB - <https://www.facebook.com/rachel.dickson.39>

Steve James – Executive Producer

Steve James' previous work includes **Hoop Dreams**; Sundance award winner, **Stevie**; **The Interrupters**, which won an Emmy, Independent Spirit Award, and the DuPont Columbia Journalism Award; Emmy winner **Life Itself**, named best documentary by The National Board of Review, and The Producers Guild of America among many others; and **Abacus: Small Enough to Jail**, which earned James a second Academy Award nomination. His Starz docuseries, **America to Me**, premiered at Sundance and was one of the most acclaimed TV shows of 2018. His most recent docuseries, **City So Real** premiered to rave reviews at Sundance in 2020.

SOCIAL MEDIA ASSETS

CREDITS

Directed and Produced by
Kevin Shaw

Produced by
Rachel Dickson

Cinematography and Editing by
Kevin Shaw

Sound by
Rachel Dickson

Original Score by
Kahil El'Zabar

Executive Producers

Steve James
Sally Jo Fifer

Executive Producers for American Documentary | POV

Erika Dilday
Chris White

Executive Producer for Black Public Media

Leslie Fields Cruz

Featuring

Elisabeth Greer and Family
Niketa Brar
Teneka Brooks
Isaac Castelaz
Chance the Rapper
Olive Cosey
Tina Feldstein
John Jacoby

Audrey Johnson and Family

John "J.P." Pointer
Amy Rome
Yaa Agyena
Marieyea Crawford
Taylor Wallace

And the families and educators at National Teachers Academy

Supervising Producer

Michael Kinomoto

Consulting Producer

Noland Walker

Field Producer

Fenell Doremus

Archival Producer

Emily Hart

Graphic Artists

Dizzy Giant – Dan Sharkey
Pablo Londero
John Castelli

Editing Consultant

David Simpson

Gordon Quinn

Assistant Editors

Rubin Daniels

Pedro Urgiles

Additional Cinematography

Adam Singer

Rachel Dickson

Aiko Kojima Hubino

Joshua Jackson

Jackson James

Michael Swanson

Hannah Welever

Drone Cinematographers

Andrew Weiler

Robert Gaona

David Parfitt

Additional Sound Recordists

Alan Chow

Hayden Jackson

Zak Piper

Rich Pooler

Musicians

Kahil El'Zabar - composer/multi-percussion/flute/voice

Miguel de la Cerna - co arranger/piano

Corey Wilkes - trumpet

Alex Harding - baritone saxophone

Royce Harrington - trombone

Nicholas Tremulis - guitar

Ernie Adams - drums

Josh Ramos - bass

Kasan Blackburn - composer-producer mix tracks

Meagan Mcneal - vocals

James Sanders - violin/string ensemble director

Tamara Glassburg - violin

Nora Williams - viola

David Caplan - cello

Post Production Services

Nolo Digital, Inc.

Digital Colorist - Eliot Rudmann
Assistant Colorist - Kathleen Young

BAM Studios
Sound Mixer - Matt Sauro

Legal Counsel
Donaldson Callip Perez
Swanson, Martin & Bell, LLP

Finance and Business Affairs Consultant
Suzanne Niemoth

Transcriptions
Rev.com
Lucia Agajanian

Archival Materials Provided by

ABC News
AP Images
CBS News
Chicago Public Schools
Crain's Chicago Business
Getty Images
Redux Pictures
Megan Cottrell
Chuck Fowler
Brian Schodorf

The filmmakers would like to thank

Ximena Amescua
Maggie Bowman
Margaret Caples
Kristin Feeley
Brendan Healey
Tim Horsburgh
Laura Gomez-Mesquita
Alex Kotlowitz
Beth Levinson
Loira Limbal
Linda Lutton
Monica Navarro
Stanley Nelson
Marilyn Ness
Diane Quon
Anu Rana
Heidi Reinberg
Brenda Robinson
Marcia Smith

Keith Walker
Chloe Walters-Wallace
Teresa White

Funding Provided by
Field Foundation of Illinois
International Documentary Association – Pare Lorentz Fund
Catapult Film Fund
Firelight Media
Kartemquin Films Diverse Voices in Documentary

Original Series Funding Provided by

Corporation for Public Broadcasting
Black Public Media

For Olive (Taylor Wallace’s grandmother who passed in 2021)

For Henrietta (Kevin Shaw’s mother who passed in 2022)

LET THE LITTLE LIGHT SHINE is a co-production of SCHOOL FILM, LLC and INDEPENDENT TELEVISION SERVICE (ITVS), in association with BLACK PUBLIC MEDIA (BPM), with funding provided by the CORPORATION FOR PUBLIC BROADCASTING (CPB).

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