

THE BAD KIDS
a film by
Keith Fulton & Lou Pepe



www.thebadkidsmovie.com

Publicity Contacts:
Ginsberg/Libby

Chris Libby
Chris.Libby@GinsbergLibby.com

Ryan Collins
Ryan.Collins@ginsberglibby.com

Sales Agent:
Abby Davis
Preferred Content
323-782-9193
abby@preferredcontent.net

LOGLINE

At a remote Mojave Desert high school, extraordinary educators believe that empathy and life skills, more than academics, give at-risk students command of their own futures. This coming-of-age drama watches education combat the crippling effects of poverty in the lives of these so-called "bad kids."

SYNOPSIS

Located in an impoverished Mojave Desert community, Black Rock Continuation High School is one of California's alternative schools for students at risk of dropping out. Every student here has fallen so far behind in credits that they have no hope of earning a diploma at a traditional high school. Black Rock is their last chance.

The Bad Kids is an observational documentary that chronicles one extraordinary principal's mission to realize the potential of these students whom the system has deemed lost causes. Employing a verité approach during a year at the school, the film follows Principal Vonda Viland as she coaches three at-risk teens--a new father who can't support his family, a young woman grappling with sexual abuse, and an angry young man from an unstable home--through the traumas and obstacles that rob them of their spirit and threaten their goal of a high school diploma.

But ***The Bad Kids*** is not just a story of one teacher making a difference. It is a look at a practical model for how public education can address and combat the crippling effects of poverty in the lives of other American schoolchildren. Parallel to her efforts with the three main characters, we also see Viland's philosophies in constant application: through the customs of the school, through her attentions to other teens and their crises, and through her tireless efforts to promote the school's mission both within the district and at the state level.

The Bad Kids is not a story of triumph against all odds, because that isn't the reality of these students' lives or expectations. It is a story of taking achievable steps toward pride and security.

DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

In 2011 Teaching Channel, a Gates Foundation start-up, commissioned us to make a series of short films about exceptional public school teachers. We felt it would be much more interesting to find exceptional teachers who were doing their best in difficult circumstances, and thus limited our search to inner city and rural schools. We found there our share of devoted teachers, all of whom were vocal about the same issue: there was only so much a teacher could do without the resources to handle the unique problems of an impoverished student body. From that point on, we found ourselves building an alliance not just with these teachers and their schools, but also with the beleaguered institution of public education itself.

Those alliances led us to a yearlong production, *The New Teacher Experience*, for which we followed four young teachers in the first year of their careers at two of L.A.'s most challenged high schools. Despite the schools' 'failing' reputations, we again found tremendous devotion among the staff and administrators. But the schools' unwieldy teacher-to-student ratios and desperate lack of funds awakened us to a heartbreaking problem: our culture expects its idealistic young teachers to wage a losing battle. No amount of devotion can solve the problems of poverty in the classroom. Not without a meaningful commitment of resources.

It was during one of our scouts for Teaching Channel in the Joshua Tree area that we first stepped through the doors of Black Rock High. What we saw there left an indelible mark. Here was a safety net to catch the very problems that were causing other teachers and schools to 'fail.' Here was a principal who had a kind word or nod of recognition for each and every kid; a secretary who spent all day on the phone with parents; teachers who didn't lecture but moved through their classrooms in quiet consultation with each student; and these supposed 'bad kids' lining the hallways with their guitars, their laughter, their clear and familial support for one another. All of this at a public school ... with rising graduation rates.

It is the greatest hope of any documentarian to gain intimate access to a subject that dramatically represents a pressing human issue. At Black Rock High we have found precisely that. It is a school that tackles head-on America's most serious education problem: intractable, generational poverty. About such a crisis, one can make a film that speechifies and rattles off facts and figures, but at Black Rock we have the opportunity to create a moving and immersive drama that brings to life an inspiring attempt to combat this issue.

Keith Fulton & Lou Pepe
Producers/Directors

ON EDUCATION

On the national level, media focus and cultural discourse about the problems of America's education system and the lack of global competitiveness have tended to go in one of two directions: either to speculate about privatization or modifying curricula, or to scapegoat bad teachers and failing schools. However, one issue that does not penetrate the discussion often enough is the impact of intractable, generational poverty. This is precisely what former Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch and other progressive defenders of the public school system believe the true problem to be. Ravitch maintains that reform efforts will continue to flounder until there is acknowledgment about the significance of poverty and its effects on learning.

Black Rock High School offers a rare look at the ways that poverty can be tackled from within public education. Black Rock is one of about 500 alternative public high schools that comprise California's Continuation Education Program, the mission of which is to identify students who are at risk of dropping out of conventional high schools and re-engage them in completing their secondary education. Dropout rates are inextricably tied to poverty. Students from the bottom 20% of all family incomes are five times more likely to drop out of high school than those in the top 20%; and Black Rock serves a community where the poverty rate is 18.12% versus 14.88% nationwide.

Continuation schools like Black Rock have been the most effective program in California's dropout intervention efforts for almost 95 years, but despite their success, little public attention is paid to their methods or to the problems they address. These schools also suffer from a lack of uniformity in their practices. In some cases, continuation schools have become punitive environments--repositories for the so-called 'bad kids'--and whether those kids achieve is less important than removing them from the mainstream schools. However, in March of 2015, Black Rock was named one of 29 Model Continuation Schools in the State of California, recognized for providing innovative programs and comprehensive services to students who may otherwise be at risk of not graduating. Black Rock High School is a dropout intervention model for both California and the country at large.

For Principal Vonda Viland and her staff, coping with the traumas her students suffer in their home lives takes precedence over force-feeding them facts and figures. At Black Rock, it is understood that it might be necessary to focus an entire year on just keeping a student in school and trying to understand his or her obstacles before expecting academic progress. Patience, respect, and compassion are the tools employed to build a foundation for student success. Realistic preparations for the work force and for life's responsibilities outweigh planning for further higher education: these students can pursue a college education only if they first know how to support themselves.

Viland is not alone in this thinking. Discourse among educators is shifting towards

this more humanistic approach. In a recent New York Times article, Robert Balfanz, the Director of Johns Hopkins' Everyone Graduates Center, muses on the principles of an ideal dropout prevention program by asking:

What if we reorganized entire schools with teams of teachers who shared a common group of students? What if we welcomed students to school, called them if they didn't show up, and helped with homework? What if we used an early warning system that identified struggling students based on their poor attendance, behavior and course performance, and then worked to get each student back on track?

These are precisely the tenets of Black Rock's practice. The filmmaker's goal in making a film at Black Rock High was two-fold: to shine a spotlight on the underserved students whose potential as good citizens society sorely underestimates; and to highlight Black Rock's model for realizing these students' potential.

STYLE AND VISUAL APPROACH

At Black Rock, Keith Fulton and Lou Pepe had a level of intimate access to the students, their home lives, the principal, and the workings of the school that allowed for an immersive verité film—a rare opportunity to present audiences with a memorable dramatic experience *of* the topic, instead of a polemic driven by interviews about the topic.

The filmmakers employed an unobtrusive two-person crew (DSLR and sound/boom) and a non-interventional style that allowed events to unfold naturally. Editorially, the duo preserved this observational style and presented the material without distancing, third-person narration or talking-head interviews.

Because the three primary student characters represented a larger population of at-risk youth whose voices had been marginalized, Fulton and Pepe also had a strong desire to privilege their perspectives in the narrative. To this end, along with the verité scenes, the filmmakers incorporated more stylized, poetic sequences, driven by intimate audio interviews with the main characters, to invite audiences into these teenagers' inner worlds: their fears and their dreams for the future. Creating audience awareness of their issue through an emotional and visceral connection to the subjects was of paramount importance.

Black Rock's Mojave Desert location was also an important character in the film, speaking powerfully of the abandonment and isolation that mark the subjects' lives.

POINT OF VIEW

As the subjects in the film are members of an impoverished community and coped with life circumstances that many audiences would find shocking, there was a risk of sensationalizing and exploiting their lives. Fulton and Pepe were aware of this danger and extremely sensitive to its ethical ramifications. They did not undertake the project, nor did they present the students' lives, as a form of lurid entertainment. Rather, their struggles helped elucidate a larger social problem about the effects of poverty on education; and the filmmakers presented them within the context of Principal Viland's efforts to achieve positive solutions.

As documentarians, Fulton and Pepe were well aware that they would always be outsiders to their subjects' lives. What surprised them most about the teens was how frank and open they were about their circumstances. The intimate access they provided to their private lives was humbling. The filmmakers respected their frankness and wanted to do it justice by giving them a voice in the film--presenting them in the way that they present themselves, not as the objectified, unfortunate failures that their culture and educational system deemed them.

THE SUBJECTS



Vonda Viland, principal

Vonda Viland has a mission. You can see it in her eyes. Being the principal of Black Rock High isn't just a job to her; she tackles it with such gusto that there's no mistaking that she loves what she does. A former Minnesota farm girl whose grandmother ran a one-room schoolhouse, Viland runs Black Rock similarly: she knows the lives and business, strengths and challenges of each of the school's 120 students, and she treats each one of them as if her own value rests entirely on his or her success.

At the start of each morning, she is out on the curb to greet the school bus and set the day's tone for each student: a hug for a kid who's been having trouble at home, a compliment to a girl who's smiling today, a gentle but firm warning to a kid who thought that yesterday's absence had escaped her notice. As Viland says about herself in her frequent student intake sessions: "I'm not just the principal. I'm the assistant principal, the guidance counselor, the nurse, the cook, your mother, your father ... and sometimes the swift kick in your ass." Viland doesn't foster false hopes or dreams of unlikely riches. Her philosophy embodies empathy and realism, and given Black Rock's rising graduation rate, it seems to be working.

Her students' lives run the gamut of tragedy: unplanned pregnancies, abuse, abandonment, homelessness; and unlike other teenagers, they view their high school education as a critical second chance. Most have been deprived of parental love and support, but the attention they receive at Black Rock motivates them to earn their diplomas and begin responsible lives.

In 2015, Viland led the effort to get Black Rock recognized as a California Model Continuation High School, a status that makes it an exemplar for similar schools throughout the state. To Viland, the work is not just about her own students but an

entire nation of children whose educations and futures are threatened by the effects of poverty.



Jennifer

Jennifer is a model student: smart, focused, and on top of it all, beautiful, outgoing, and charming. She exhibits all the ease of a 'popular' kid and chats with fellow students about her plans to get a nursing degree. So what is she even doing at a school for at-risk students? How did a smart, hard-working girl fall behind at the high school? When asked about this, Jennifer describes herself as a handful, as a wild child--running off to Vegas at 13 with her boyfriend, tracked down and brought back by her grandmother. Part of the blame, she says, is on the impoverished towns that make up the school district: "There's nothing for kids to do out here ... except get into trouble." Now that she's at Black Rock, she wants to leave her troublesome past behind.



Joey

A scrawny pale boy wanders the hallways of Black Rock with his guitar, playing the blues for anyone who'll listen. This is Joey. "I like to think I live a rock star life," Joey admits. But his life at school is far from glamorous. Joey can't manage to get any work done or get to school most days, and both Principal Viland and the teachers

are constantly on his case. Joey doesn't understand his lack of motivation. He knows he's smart. He writes beautiful songs. But he can't get any sleep at home where his young unemployed mother parties late into the night. "I'm not a bad kid; I just ended up like the people I grew up with." Joey lacks positive examples in his life, and the staff at Black Rock does its best to provide them. His "brother" AJ—a boy he grew up with and with whom he writes songs—has also recently enrolled at Black Rock. A.J.'s a kid with a plan, and he might just inspire Joey ... if Joey could just stop harping on his own failures. "I know I can graduate from this place," Joey boasts on a good day. Principal Viland very much hopes so too.



Lee

Lee is an eighteen year-old with a philosophical bent. "Other kids think the world is all happy ... I tell 'em, 'No, the world is a dark place.'" He's a recent a father, and while he couldn't be more proud, he, too, is just a kid. With more than a year's worth of credits needed to graduate, Lee is naive about the struggles that fatherhood has in store for him. With no car, no jobs, and no income for their own apartment, he and his girlfriend shuttle back-and-forth between their parents' houses as they work toward their diplomas. Lee is a paradox. There is the one Lee who plays the tough guy, and there is the other who's often seen giving a fellow student a much-needed hug. The real Lee wants to care for people professionally. Once he has his diploma in hand, he intends to enroll in nursing school. But he has a tough road to get there.

THE FILMMAKERS

Directors:

Keith Fulton (Producer/Director/Sound) directs both documentary and fiction films, among them *Lost in La Mancha*, shortlisted for the Academy Award for Best Documentary and winner of the Evening Standard's Peter Sellers Award for Best Comedy; *Brothers of the Head*, winner of the Michael Powell Award for Best British Feature; and *Malkovich's Mail*, an original documentary special for AMC. *La Mancha* and *Brothers* were distributed theatrically by IFC Films in the U.S. and screened at international film festivals including: Berlin, Toronto, Telluride, Chicago, IDFA, Edinburgh, Tokyo, Los Angeles, Tribeca, SXSW, San Francisco, and Cinema Jove Valencia.

Fulton holds an MFA in Radio-TV-Film from Temple University, has attended the Sundance Institute's Feature Film Screenwriters Lab, and is a current fellow of the Sundance Documentary Film Program. He has collaborated with co-director Lou Pepe for over 20 years. As Low Key Pictures they have received commissions from the Gates and Participant Foundations to create documentary programming about public education, including *The New Teacher Experience* (WNET, www.TeachingChannel.org) and the web-series *I Am Education* (www.TakePart.com). Fulton's interest in education also extends to practice, and he actively participates as an instructor and mentor in Temple University's L.A. Study-Away program for aspiring young filmmakers.

Lou Pepe (Director/Cinematographer) directs both documentary and fiction films, among them *Lost in La Mancha*, shortlisted for the Academy Award for Best Documentary and winner of the Evening Standard's Peter Sellers Award for Best Comedy; *Brothers of the Head*, winner of the Michael Powell Award for Best British Feature; and *Malkovich's Mail*, an original documentary special for AMC. *La Mancha* and *Brothers* were distributed theatrically by IFC Films in the U.S. and screened at international film festivals including: Berlin, Toronto, Telluride, Chicago, IDFA, Edinburgh, Tokyo, Los Angeles, Tribeca, SXSW, San Francisco, and Cinema Jove Valencia.

Pepe holds an MFA in Film & Media Arts from Temple University, has attended the Sundance Institute's Feature Film Directors Lab, and is currently a fellow of the Sundance Documentary Film Program. He has collaborated with co-director Keith Fulton for over 20 years. As Low Key Pictures they have received commissions from the Gates and Participant Foundations to create documentary programming about public education, including *The New Teacher Experience* (WNET, www.TeachingChannel.org) and the web-series *I Am Education* (www.TakePart.com). Pepe's interest in education also extends to practice, and he

serves as the Faculty Director of Temple University's L.A. Study-Away program for aspiring young filmmakers.

Co-Producer:

Molly O'Brien is the lead Producer for [Indie Caucus](#), a national group of independent documentary filmmakers who believe in the public mission of public television. Prior to her work for Indie Caucus, O'Brien was the producer of [Catalyst Forum](#) for Sundance Institute, an innovative annual convening of creative investors, industry, and independent filmmakers. In 2014, O'Brien's film [Cesar's Last Fast](#) (producer/executive producer) premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, US documentary competition. [Cesar's Last Fast](#) sold to Participant Media's Pivot TV and Univision, and is available for streaming on Netflix and iTunes. O'Brien won a primetime Emmy for producing in 2000 ([American High](#), FoxTV), was nominated for a primetime Emmy in 2001 ([American High](#)) and made a 2010 Sundance Institute Creative Producing Fellow ([Cesar's Last Fast](#)). Her first documentary film, ([A Pig With Hair](#), PBS), was shortlisted for the Academy Awards in 1998. O'Brien is a graduate of NYU's Tisch School of the Arts and lives in Brooklyn, New York.

Editor:

Jacob Bricca is an award-winning film editor, director and teacher. His editing credits include the international theatrical hit *Lost in La Mancha*, the New Yorker Films theatrical release, *Con Artist*, and two films that have shown on PBS's *Independent Lens* series. His directorial credits include *Indies Under Fire: The Battle for the American Bookstore*, which won awards at the Newbury Documentary Festival and the Santa Cruz Film Festival, and *Finding Tatanka*, which premiered this year at the prestigious Big Sky Documentary Film Festival. He is an Assistant Professor at the University of Arizona's School of Theatre, Film and Television.

Editor:

Mary Lampson is an award-winning independent documentary filmmaker and editor. Lampson co edited the Academy Award-winning documentary *Harlan County, USA* and acted as an editor on many other independently produced documentary features. She has worked with Emile de Antonio, Ricky Leacock, and D.A. Pennebaker.

She also produced and directed *Until She Talks*. This 40-minute dramatic film was produced independently and then acquired by the PBS series American Playhouse. Lampson has produced more than 25 short live-action films for *Sesame Street* and teaches filmmaking to children as an artist-in-residence in public schools.

Recent projects include: *A Lion In The House* (Steven Bognar and Julia Reickert), *Rain In A Dry Land* and *We Still Live Here* (Anne Makepeace), *Trouble The Water* (Tia Lessin and Carl Deal), *Kimjonglilia* (NC Heikin), *Camp Victory, Afghanistan* (Carol Dysinger), *On Coal River* (Francine Cavanaugh and Adams Wood), *Gurukulam* (Jillian Elizabeth), *Queen Of Versailles* (Lauren Greenfield), *The Revolutionary Optimists* (Nicole Newnham and Maren Monson-Grainger), *This Changes Everything* (Avi Lewis)

and Naomi Klein), *What Tomorrow Brings* (Beth Murphy) and *The Island And The Whales* (Mike Day.)

She has been both a fellow and advisor at the Sundance Institute's Documentary Editing and Story Lab and is a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

CREDITS

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The Bad Kids

End Credits

Directed by
Keith Fulton & Lou Pepe

Produced by
Keith Fulton

Director of Photography
Lou Pepe

Edited by
Jacob Bricca
Mary Lampson

Original Score by
Jacaszek

Executive Producers
Ted Dintersmith
Donna Gruneich & Kevin Gruneich
Ari Ioannides & Christine Ioannides

Co-Producer

Molly O'Brien

Associate Producers
Nancy Blachman
Anne O'Shea & Brian Quattrini

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Production Sound Recording and Mixing	Keith Fulton
Sound Designer and Re-recording Mixer	Michael Kowalski
Additional Editing	Bill Hilferty
Editorial Consultant	Geraud Brisson
Assistant Editor	Bill Hilferty
Sundance Edit and Story Lab Advisors	Ra'anan Alexandrowicz Marshall Curry Tom Haneke Mary Lampson Geoffrey Richman Jean Tsien Lynette Wallworth
Sundance Edit and Story Lab Contributing Editor	Katie Turinski
Editorial Intern	Jared Widman
Assistant Sound Editor	Wenrui "Sam" Fan
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Finishing by	Fancy Film Post Services
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VFX
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Producer's Assistant

Shelby Ferguson

Post-Production Interns

Tom Brady
Eitan Kleinman
Matthew Lilly
Blake Morgan-Gamber

Transcription

Megan Haney
Ben Roth

	Sarah Wong
Assistant to Mr. Hilferty	Snarby Richard
Stills Photographer	Robert Beckwith
End Titles created with	ENDCRAWL.com
Original Score produced by	Michał Jacaszek
Cello	Ania Śmiszek-Wesołowska
Violin	Julia Ziętek
Viola	Kuba Szwarc
Violin	Stefan Wesołowski
Vocals	Joanna Sobowiec-Jamioł
Accordion	Piotr Zagańczyk

“Sing Her Song”

Written by Joseph Patrick McGee
Performed by Joseph Patrick McGee

“I’m Yours”

Written by Jason Mraz
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“I Just Don’t Care”

Written by Albert Lee Wright, Jr.
Performed by Albert Lee Wright, Jr. (aka Mike Craftsman)

“This Town (Redux)”

Written by Albert Lee Wright Jr., Joseph Patrick McGee and Jorge Corante
Performed by Mike Craftsman and Joey
Courtesy of Urban Authentic

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