

being michelle

Voices unseen. Justice silenced. Love abounds.



DISCUSSION GUIDE

Take a moment to self-reflect on the story, for example, consider:

In school, have you experienced learning about Deaf & Disabled people in the criminal justice system? (When someone is Deaf with an additional disability, they are also referred to as Deaf Plus.)

Share a time in your life when you didn't feel heard or understood.

Was there a moment or scene in the film that resonated with you?

What are ways you can make a connection and communicate with a deaf person that doesn't involve them communicating with you on your own terms? Pen and paper? Typing on a cell phone? Gestures? Learning basic ASL?

What do you think we can do from a state, federal or societal perspective to ensure that everyone experiences the basic human Right to Communication?

“Michelle’s story represents a large number of people who are completely overlooked by our society, especially by our criminal legal system.”

-Lauren Appelbaum, VP of RespectAbility



TAKE ACTION NOW

We envision a society where the basic human **RIGHT TO COMMUNICATION** is accessible to all, especially to those who are Deaf and Disabled in the criminal justice system.

- Sign up for the **Being Michelle** newsletter to stay updated on upcoming initiatives being implemented with our partner organizations. www.beingmichelle.com
- If you're a teacher, stay tuned for more in-depth supplemental educational resources written by the film's Advisors and editors of the book: *Deaf People in the Criminal Justice System: Selected Topics on Advocacy, Incarceration, and Social Justice*, to be accompanied by videos in ASL with Deaf leaders and advocates.



“Deaf people need to be able to communicate with police officers. They can’t communicate if their hands are tied up or if they don’t have an interpreter.”
-Michelle Ricks

LOGLINE

BEING MICHELLE is an award-winning feature-length documentary film about a deaf woman with autism who survived incarceration and abuse and now uses her artwork to depict the trauma she survived and heal from her past.

SYNOPSIS

BEING MICHELLE follows the astonishing journey of a deaf and disabled woman who survived incarceration and abuse under unimaginable circumstances by a system that refused to accommodate her needs as a deaf person with autism. Michelle’s trajectory changed when she met Kim Law, a blind volunteer life coach who teaches classes to people in prison. Today, outside of prison, Kim and Michelle are doing the difficult work of unraveling Michelle’s history, of telling the story of Michelle’s traumatic childhood and her adverse experiences in the criminal justice system. With the support of Kim, Michelle realizes her own voice and strength. Throughout the film Michelle’s artwork provides her own depiction of the trauma she survived as well as a means to her recovery. Ultimately, **BEING MICHELLE** is a story of redemption. It is about the bonds between women committed to thriving in a broken system, who are forging a path to healing that can only come through facing the truth and communicating it, together.



FOR EDUCATORS

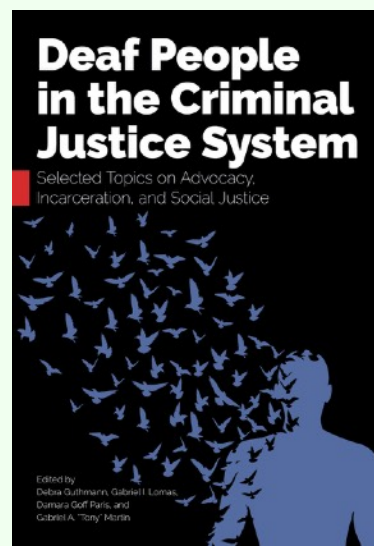
The use of **BEING MICHELLE** and accompanying materials in the classroom can promote ongoing dialogue to support student voices, opinions, and ideas and be an opportunity of how to examine their world and how to make positive changes within it. The viewing of **BEING MICHELLE** with your students can be a dynamic and engaging experience in your classroom. We recommend that sessions be led by a facilitator, whether a teacher or another professional at your school. The focus may compliment topics in your current curriculum and programming such as civil and human rights, civic responsibility, or Social Emotional Learning (SEL). Depending on post-viewing discussions, the film can extend into additional lessons, helping schools meet objectives in various domains.

DEAF PEOPLE IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM



BEING MICHELLE presents a special opportunity to raise awareness around the disproportionate impact of incarceration and systemic discrimination of Deaf and Disabled people. The film can help shift the public safety narrative from one of policing and incarceration to one of community and public health investments. Michelle's story also demonstrates the significance of art as a healing tool.

"The legal system is complex, and without appropriate access, many injustices can occur. Deaf people in the criminal justice system are routinely denied sign language interpreters, videophone access, and other accommodations at each stage of the legal process. The marginalization of deaf people in the criminal justice system is further exacerbated by the lack of advocates who are qualified to work with this population. "Deaf People in the Criminal Justice System: Selected Topics on Advocacy, Incarceration, and Social Justice" is the first book to illuminate the challenges faced by deaf people when they are arrested, incarcerated, or navigating the court system. This volume brings interdisciplinary contributors together to shed light on both the problems and solutions for deaf people in these circumstances." —Debra Guthmann, Gabriel I. Lomas, Damara Goff Paris, Gabriel A. "Tony" Martin



INTERPRETING

"Highly qualified interpreters are needed to work in legal settings—particularly in court and law enforcement settings where high-risk situations and personal freedoms are often the focus. Legal settings often require interpreters to hold special certifications to assure they can communicate with the correct legal vocabulary, stay in their role, and not impact the outcome of the legal situation.

A qualified sign language interpreter is not only someone with professional training and fluency in American Sign Language but also a person that can assess communication preferences and adapt their interpretation to meet those needs. Sometimes when resources are not available, there is a misconception that anyone who indicates they know "sign language" can provide a faithful and accurate interpretation." —Debra Guthmann, Gabriel I. Lomas, Damara Goff Paris, Gabriel A. "Tony" Martin

A Certified Deaf Interpreter (CDI) is a native American Sign Language (ASL) user who can provide cultural and linguistic expertise. CDIs can be used in many situations but especially for Deaf individuals involved in high-risk or challenging assignments. Some examples include: courtroom, school or legal settings, when an individual uses atypical language, is a strong ASL user or from another country.

ADA

"According to the Department of Justice, Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), people who are deaf are entitled to the same services law enforcement provides to anyone else. Law enforcement agencies must make efforts to ensure that their personnel communicate effectively with people whose disability affects hearing. This applies to both sworn and civilian personnel. The Department of Justice also has requirements for effective communication that law enforcement agencies are supposed to follow. According to the ADA, law enforcement agencies must provide the communication aids and services needed to communicate effectively with people who are deaf, except when a particular aid or service would result in an undue burden or a fundamental change in the nature of the law enforcement services being provided. The agencies cannot charge the person for the communication aids or services provided. When interpreters are needed, agencies must provide interpreters who can interpret effectively, accurately, and impartially. Only the head of the agency or his or her designee can make the determination that a particular aid or service would cause an undue burden or a fundamental change in the nature of the law enforcement services being provided. Each agency's policy should explain how to obtain interpreters or other communication aids and services when needed." —Debra Guthmann, Gabriel I. Lomas, Damara Goff Paris, Gabriel A. "Tony" Martin

[Communicating with People Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing ADA Guide for Law Enforcement Officers](#)

[ADA Requirements: Effective Communication](#)



FACTS AND STATISTICS RELATED TO INCARCERATION & DEAF & DISABLED INDIVIDUALS

“More than an estimated 750,000 incarcerated individuals have a disability. 32% of those in federal prisons and 40% of individuals incarcerated in jails have at least one disability.

Additionally, an estimated 153,000 deaf individuals are incarcerated in jails or state and federal prisons.”

— [REPORT BY RESPECTABILITY, MIZRAHI ET. AL, 2016](#)

“Black individuals with disabilities are disproportionately affected by systemic injustices and are at a particularly high risk for arrest with 55% being arrested by age 28.”

— [MCCAULEY, 2017](#)

“According to a report by Ruderman Family Foundation, between 1/3 and 1/2 of people killed by law enforcement officers have a disability.”

— [PERRY & CARTER-LONG, 2016](#)

“Youth with disabilities are disproportionately represented in correctional facilities and estimated to form up to 80% of incarcerated youth.

Youth with disabilities are more likely to be incarcerated at an earlier age and be repeat offenders.”

— [HOUSE ET AL, 2018](#)

“According to the U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics, people with disabilities experience rape and sexual assault at more than twice the rate at which persons without disabilities do.”

— [RAND & HARRELL, 2007](#)

DO YOU WANT TO LEARN ASL? Try these programs!

ASL University <https://www.lifeprint.com/asl101/index.htm>
American Society for Deaf Children <https://deafchildren.org/>
ASLdeafined www.asldeafined.com
The ASL App www.theaslapp.com
The ASL Shop: <https://www.theaslshop.com>



“I love Michelle. And I believe her story empowers all of us to recognize our own strengths and innate abilities even when our surrounding culture and systems do not. The systems must change in the United States and globally to support everyone.”

-Atin Mehra, Director, BEING MICHELLE

BEING MICHELLE is already sparking conversations, increasing awareness, and bringing together deaf and hearing communities to change the way Deaf, Disabled, Deaf and Disabled/Deaf Plus people are treated in the US criminal justice system and beyond, but there’s a lot of work that needs to be done. Sign up for the newsletter on the website and join us as we work to ensure the basic human **#RightToCommunication**.

We all have the right to communication.

BEING MICHELLE may bring up thoughts, feelings or memories of past experiences. If you need extra support, reach out to a mental health professional to help identify and cope with your feelings in a safe and supportive setting. Resources include:

National Deaf Therapy: <https://nationaldeaftherapy.com/>

Deaf Counseling Center: <https://deafcounseling.com/>

National Association of the Deaf Mental Health Services: <https://www.nad.org/resources/health-care-and-mental-health-services/mental-health-services/>

For additional resources please visit the film's website.

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YouTube: [beingmichellefilm](https://www.youtube.com/beingmichellefilm)

LinkedIn: [being-michelle](https://www.linkedin.com/company/being-michelle)



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