

TRANSCRIPT:

I Could Tell You 'Bout My Life

a BYkids film

THEIR WORLD THEIR FILMS



**[Music]**

**Mike:** *I could tell you about my life.  
I could tell you never pick or choose.  
A couple of us did it right.  
A few of us done broke the rules.  
I used to chill outside on the block.  
I've been locked up,  
I've been shot.*

I think it's important to tell people your story. Why? 'Cause you never know, like, everybody got a different point of view, and sometimes that point of view could help the next person. It's a chance to speak about how you feel in life—basically just establish a connection.

**[Music]**

**Mike:** My name is Michael; everybody calls me Mike. I'm 19 years old, I live in East Harlem, born and raised, still here, so, I know East Harlem. I feel like it's not easy. Cops just pull up on the block and it's normal, like, they just come, want to kick us off the block. We don't got a school yard to go hang in no more. Right now we only got one court. The other court was definitely taken away from us. It was certain situations where stuff was stolen they took that part away from us so we can't play ball. We couldn't go in the park to chill no more, nothing. When people get bored, they find dumb stuff to do.

**[Music]**

**Mike:** Umm, what's your name?

**Cynthia:** Cynthia C. James.

**Mike:** What is your relationship to me?

**Cynthia:** Your grandmother.

**Mike:** Loosen up, you look stiff.

**Cynthia:** How loose you want me to get?

**Mike:** How did you become my guardian?

**Cynthia:** Well, Michael, it's a long story. The circumstances I would not like to go into about your mother. Um, she had problems, and I couldn't see myself letting you go into foster care. I had to go to family court. I put up a little argument and I told the social worker that i'm taking my grandson home. That's how i wind up with you. I raised five grandchildren in a one bedroom apartment. I worked 12 hours a day, from eight to eight. The little bit of money that HRA gave us was not enough for five kids. I was getting 231 dollars to buy clothes, shoes, and coats.

**Mike:** Was it hard raising us five?

**[Music]**

**Mike:** Couple youngins always breaking rules.  
Never staying true just the summertime blues.  
Hot in the winter cold in the summer,  
Drop top coop? Yeah I'm in the hummer.  
Yeah I barely even know my mother.  
Always played the block, but those was my brothers  
cause when i'm from we don't switch on each other.

**Cynthia:** I taught you when you was five years old, we used to walk down this block every day and we used to see police getting people in handcuffs. I said Michael, this is not how you want to live your life. But as soon as you turn 16, Michael, that's when you got in trouble.

**Mike:** Everybody wanted to try to be, like, macho man, like, a movie like Scarface. He had a lot of money. He felt like he's untouchable. Some people just want to feel like that. Uhh, at a point in time I was just at the 'I didn't care about nothing' stage. I got caught up in the wrong crowd. It was me and a group of kids, we was bored. They had nothing to do. It was a bad thing to do, But I think they probably needed the money, so I just tagged along, like, "hey, let's do it".

**Cynthia:** I didn't find out you got in trouble 'til the next day, because I was trying to figure out why you didn't come home that night. Everybody called everybody, but nobody came here and told me. When I found out, my heart went to the floor. They told me that you were gonna have court the next day. I just prayed that you don't have to do the time.

**Mike:** I went out to the courtroom, and the judge gave me forty thousand dollars bail. From there I already knew I was going to Rikers. If you can't afford bail, whether they find you guilty or not guilty, they still send you the Rikers.

**[Music]**

**Mike:** Rikers is selfish, it's nasty. It was a lot of things in there that was nasty. People in general, COs. When you get arrested, they say, like, you are now enslaved. You gotta do whatever we tell you to do. Say if I was like in there right now, and, I was to get into a fight, whether I started the fight or not, I'm getting sprayed, the other kid getting sprayed, we're getting sprayed with the thing that they're using on beds when the bed (unsure of this word, timestamp 7:00). You use that on the animals, so for you to use that on a human being, it's like foul business. They throw you in the pen, it's called the "Forget About It Pen". It's barely any cameras. No matter what you do, like if a guard beat on you and it's not able to be shown they're not gonna take your word for it. You're a criminal, they don't give a damn about you. But at the end of the day you got to watch your own back in jail so if I gotta fight every day because every way y'all pullin' me, I gotta fight and fight and I can't get phone calls and visits, it's messing me up in the mind.

I don't wanna say his name but like certain k went through that and wound up killing himself over it. Like, it's bad like, I mean if you're going to take kids from their home at least don't do what you do in jail. Like, don't, don't come spray them, beat them down, put them in tight-ass restraints. At least if you're going to take them away, do something for them. When they board like that, that's when they plot to do dumb stuff because there's nothing to do.

**[Music]**

If you didn't label me as this certain thing, people wouldn't see it that way. I want to be able to be known and recognized for who I am. I know what I did, and I definitely paid the price for it, and I'm trying to move on with it.

**Mike:** How would you, how would you say that I changed in the last couple of years?

**Cynthia:** You went from being a bad boy to a good boy. You learned how to understand what other people are saying.

**Mike:** Why did you come and help me when I was in trouble?

**Cynthia:** Because it was my grandson I love you. I didn't want to see you go to jail. Plus, you was here to help me when I go shopping, I needed somebody bring the shopping cart upstairs, to go do the laundry, go to the store for me. Do little things that I needed, take me to the doctor sometimes when I don't feel good. I was not letting you stay in jail.

**Mike:** Do you think incarceration is a productive way to reform youth offenders?

**Pierre:** I do not believe that incarceration is a productive way to reform youthful offenders. I think there's a lot of things that go into becoming a man or becoming a mature individual, and there's a lot of learning that takes place whether it's academic, whether it's maturity, whether it's social, whether it's emotional, whatever it may be. And sometimes being incarcerated takes away from a lot of that.

**Mike:** Can you imagine a solution better than incarceration?

**Pierre:** There is no one solution because you're dealing with people's lives, and you have to address individual factors that brought them to where they are, such as mental health, substance abuse. So there's no one answer to incarceration, um; however, I am a very firm believer in education over incarceration. An Ivy League education—monetarily—is equivalent to the incarceration costs of one individual for a year.

**Mike:** After I got locked up, I thought about everything. I got to graduate, I got to do something. Like, because everybody—you never know when your time could be. So...

**[Music]**

**[Chatter]**

**Morjean:** One of the things that I used to do is I used to go to Rikers Island a lot and tell, you know, the guys there about the different programs and stuff that we offer once they're back in the community. And uh I remember you being one of those guys. You always stuck out in my head because one of the things you told me was that as soon as you come home you're gonna come see me and that you're gonna come to my school. I was impressed when you actually did that.

**Mike:** I came to on friends island i got a role  
i think you know your life  
sort of  
mirrors a lot of the people we get in  
the world and i think when you go on  
becoming success in life you can just  
show people that they can do it as well  
the advice i would give kids to stay out  
of their prison system is to finish  
school  
or obtain the ged that way they can open  
doors for themselves

i could tell you one thing i will never  
run  
play me 101 catch me in the sun i am  
never done  
tell them change the system  
tell them change the world  
if i talk about turn political change  
the way we live it's a miracle  
i could tell you about my life  
i could tell you never pick a tools  
couple of us did it right  
few of us done broke the rules change  
the way i lose your life  
mama told me never be a fool get your  
chicken up and stay in school a couple  
young adults breaking rules breaking  
rules  
do you have any thoughts about the  
juvenile justice system yeah i think you  
i mean i think  
you know you're better equipped to  
answer  
that question what are your thoughts  
i hate it  
that's just the thought yeah i mean i  
think the  
the goals  
of our work are  
small in ways  
like i think teaching you the piano like  
really not that much that i can  
do for you other than those like little  
things and we really hope that those  
little things  
lead to to something within you can you  
imagine any solutions to the current  
gymnastics  
i think that  
you know when i say like there should be  
a world without prisons that sounds  
extreme and maybe scary and maybe  
impossible

you know it takes work to do that  
imagining but i think that  
what you ask this conversation is really  
important i think those are the  
conversations that we should be having  
and what i tell myself every day is that  
what we're hoping to do is build  
resilience  
and  
that we can build that resilience to a  
point where you  
can be leaders um for the future because  
you're the best people to lead  
every single music workshop you were  
always the first one to participate in  
it you're really really talented and  
that actually inspired me very much to  
want to do open mic nights because i saw  
there's so much potential in so many of  
the young people including

[Music]

yourself and youth members as well and  
so we want to give everybody a kind of  
platform to show  
what they got

[Music]

the main story of my life  
recreational

[Music]

how can a superpower  
have such a low educational system  
what do we got to do so howard  
could have the same reputation as  
princeton  
how can we have room in the class for  
everybody to sit  
yet penitentially got room for everybody

[Music]

my  
love has come along  
my lonely days  
and life is

[Music]

[Music]

okay

[Applause]

[Music]

done broke the rules change your way or

losing life

mama told me never be a fool [ \_\_ ]

chicken up for staying cool [ \_\_ ]

young as always

[Music]

[Applause]

even if you take three steps forward and

then maybe one step back those three

steps are really what i want to focus on

and that's ultimately what your

supervision has been whether it's been

educational whether it's been employment

or whether it's been community programs

what matters more is that you're

accomplishing the things that you focus

on and you're you're pursuing them and

you're staying focused on them until

they're completed

just recently i was hired by creative

arts work

to paint the mural and the bronx

the mural that we designed

was about struggling unity

the dove is like unity peace

you painted it with lily pads a boy and

a girl

and then we had two mandalas drawn on

the side one was for peace and mores

community then we drew a storm

the storm it was basically about

struggle

everybody goes to a point in time where

everybody struggles it's not one person

in this world that gotta be easy

it was probably my first on the book job

but it was just fun though and

eventually i'm gonna keep building onto  
that i'm gonna be able to buy what i  
need to buy and there's so much stuff  
that i'm doing it's positive why would i  
want to do something that's gonna mess  
my stuff up

certain opportunities once you got that  
they look at you like you got stuck  
together let's plug them in here see  
what you're about here work hard you get  
stuff done and

they'll work with you and then there's  
always another organization high up  
and then you just

you pop basically

but i hope in like the next two three  
years is that like

i could move out

have my own job

my car

hopefully like a good like a career

coming on i don't want to say like i

want to be rich but i want to be able  
to like

pay for my needs

[Music]

someone gave me an opportunity to learn

about what it is that i wanted to do

which was to be a percussionist

um my teacher was im2 may he was working

with miles davis at the time he gave me

an opportunity and i'm trying to give

back

by giving opportunities to other people

i have been a session musician a

producer writer i came up playing on

many many many records and fortunately i

have a long history of working with

artists from michael jackson to madonna

everybody has something that they a

message that they want to deliver inside

of them



and their life story comes out in what  
it is that they love to do  
yeah man that's beautiful  
there we go  
how you feeling  
comfortable yeah yeah a little rehearsal  
every time i hear a certain a certain  
beat  
like i get a feeling like a hype feeling  
it's all you just got to know is like  
how to put certain stuff together but i  
want you to feel where i'm coming from  
and hopefully you could probably relate  
skipping school  
breaking rules  
skipping school  
breaking rules  
couple youngins always breaking rules  
never staying true just the summertime  
blues hot in the winter cold in the  
summer drop top cool yeah i'm in a  
hummer yeah i barely even know my mother  
always played the block but those was my  
brothers cause where i'm from we don't  
switch on each other  
oh i forgot that's okay should i start  
right from mama no yeah keep it right  
there that was a good spot cool just  
punch him in from the future punch  
though you got a big old space  
the energy has to go up a little bit  
more all right  
everything is great though sounds  
wonderful man  
cause my other man's that's my other  
man's 100 grand can we get these bands  
do the running man never took a stand  
never took the chance till i hit the can  
i could never jam tell them change the  
system tell them change the wars if i  
took my type political change the way we  
live it's a miracle

nice so like how i was coming on like i  
come on like i could tell you about my  
life instead of doing that i could tell  
you about my life something like that  
that's right right even even dial it  
back a little less  
and remember to get back to that feeling  
i know what you're saying i heard it  
okay want to just do it i mean yeah yeah  
no door in my pocket tell some black  
team rocking get to wait up i don't do  
favors usually haters say i'm a favorite  
ships they stack like blue sleeves me  
and bro go spit like a cookie what's a  
veteran to a rookie i'm on the future  
please don't push me from the future  
don't push me i could tell you about my  
life  
i could tell you never pick a choose a  
couple of us did it right  
few of us done broke the rules change  
your way or lose your life  
mama told me never be a fool get your  
chicken up and stay in school couple  
young as always breaking rules i can  
tell you about my life  
i can tell you never pick and choose a  
couple of us did it right  
few of us done broke the rules change  
the way i lose your life  
mama told me never be a fool get your  
chicken up and stay in school couple  
youngers always breaking rules skipping  
school  
breaking rules  
skipping school  
breaking rules  
skipping schools skipping school  
breaking rules  
escaping  
and now if you look at this young man  
you would never think that he had went

to jail  
this is what you got to do  
stay out of trouble  
come home  
and listen to your grandmother  
what do you see that i don't see him  
that i may not see in myself  
i see hope  
i see love  
i see everything in you  
i hope you can see it in yourself  
you you  
be you  
[Music]  
do you know where you're going i want to  
take a test what test do you do oh yeah  
ready  
you're gonna kill it  
[Music]  
couple youngins always breaking rules  
never staying true just the summertime  
blues hot in the winter cold in the  
summer drop top cool  
yeah i'm in the hummer yeah i barely  
even know my mother always played the  
block but those was my brothers cause  
where i'm from we don't switch on each  
other no door in my pocket tell some  
black team rocket get your weight up i  
don't do favors use a hater she say i'm  
a favorite ship stay stacked like blue  
sleeve me and bro gonna spit like a  
cookie what's a veteran to a rookie i'm  
from the future please don't push me  
from the future don't push me i can tell  
you about my life  
i can tell you never pick and choose a  
couple of us did it right  
few of us done broke the rules change  
the way you lose your life  
mama told me never be a fool get your  
chicken up and stay in school couple

youngins always breaking rules i can  
tell you about my life  
i can tell you never pick a choose a  
couple of us did it right  
few of us starting broke the rules  
change your way and lose your life  
mama told me  
[Music]  
skipping school  
skipping school  
breaking rules  
[Music]  
you