

Injustice

Essential question: What happens when an innocent person is convicted of a crime?

School: Grover Washington Jr. Middle School, Philadelphia, PA

Year of project: 2003-2004

After reading about Philadelphia's Lex Street murders case, in which four young men faced the death penalty for a crime they did not commit, students in Mike Galbraith's 8th grade class became interested in the topic of wrongful convictions. They watched the award-winning documentary "Murder on a Sunday Morning," which recounts the case of Brenton Butler, a fifteen year-old Florida boy who, like the Lex Street defendants, stood trial for a murder he did not commit. His trial and eventual acquittal, which are depicted in the film, raised a number of questions for the students, including, "What are the implications for someone wrongfully accused – for the victim, for families, and for society – when the innocent are convicted?"

Students then read stories about John Thompson – a man who spent 18 years on death row in a Louisiana prison for crimes he did not commit. Philadelphia attorneys Michael Banks and J. Gordon Cooney worked *pro bono* for 15 years until a breakthrough in the case led to his eventual acquittal and release from prison.

The class invited the attorneys to the school so they could hear the story of John Thompson first hand. The students sat in rapt attention as the two lawyers shared their experience. A highpoint in the project came when Thompson flew from New Orleans to Philadelphia to meet with the students.

Other community partners who shed light on the students' topic included a prison chaplain; a public defender from Defenders Association of Philadelphia; a Deputy District Attorney; and Philadelphia's Commissioner of Police.

As their culminating service, the students formed into groups of four and presented what they had learned about rights and responsibilities under the law to the other 8th grade classes in their school.

"I got to meet two defense lawyers. They saved a man's life. It was a really big deal. It made me want, when I get older, to save someone's life.

Stacey Scott, 8th grade