

HAVANA CURVEBALL



GRADES 6-12
CLASSROOM GUIDE

USING
THIS GUIDE ▶

ABOUT
THE FILM ▶

DISCUSSION
QUESTIONS & ▶
POST-VIEWING
ACTIVITIES

MEDIA LITERACY
RESOURCES ▶

SUPPLEMENTAL
RESOURCES ▶

ARTICLES AND
REVIEWS ▶

TEACHING THE FILM:

Havana Curveball is a coming-of-age documentary following a young teenager with a grand vision of doing good by donating baseball equipment to Cuba. A class screening of the film may complement a U.S. History or Social Studies curriculum, and will encourage youth activism and community service. Taught in conjunction with this guide, the film will challenge students to think critically about the U.S. embargo with Cuba, the relationship between charity workers and the communities they serve, and the difficult lessons that transform a boy into a young man. Discussion questions and supplemental materials facilitate further research into related topics such as family history and identity, family relationships, and the process of documentary filmmaking.

All SFFS Youth Education materials are developed in alignment with California educational standards for media literacy. SFFS Youth Education welcomes feedback and questions on all printed study materials.

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USING THIS GUIDE

This study guide is intended to flexibly support educators in preparing for and following up on a class screening of **Havana Curveball**. Support

materials are intended to facilitate group discussion, individual and collaborative creative exercise, subject-based learning and access to resources for further investigation of material. Educators are encouraged to adapt and abridge the content as necessary to meet their unique learning objectives and circumstances.

ABOUT THE FILM

Mica is a classic young teen. Enthusiastic. Idealistic. Dreaming baseball. At 13, he is studying for his Bar Mitzvah, the Jewish coming of age rite. An earnest kid, he took to heart his Rabbi's requirement to help "heal the world." Imagining himself a savior of sorts, he launches a grand plan to send baseballs to Cuba, a country with a mysterious pull. He knows only that Cubans lack resources and love baseball — and that Cuba gave his grandpa refuge during WWII. On a hunch, his filmmaker parents pick up their camera. They know the U.S. embargo with Cuba will throw him a curveball.

{ Marcia Jarmel & Ken Schneider (USA, 2014)
55 minutes, In English/Spanish subtitled
Grades 6-12 }

Recommended Subject Areas:

Art/Media
Social Studies
US History
Community Service

Key concepts / buzzwords:

Activism
Adolescence
Baseball
Charity
Cuba
Cultural Identity
Family History
Holocaust
Jewish History
Judaism
Poverty
Remembrance
Service and Service Learning
The US/Cuba Embargo
Volunteerism



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-VIEWING TOPICS AND DISCUSSION:

HAVANA CURVEBALL centers upon one young man's growth and learning through a socially-engaged service project. The film examines the youthful impulse to do good within a larger context of global politics, privilege, and inequality.

Before watching, ask students about their own experiences with charity and community service.

- Do students engage in community service or civic works through the school, through after school or religious programs, or with their families?
- What does it feel like to participate in community service?
- What does it feel like to receive the benefits of community service?

You may choose to conduct this exercise in a group discussion or as an individual journaling assignment. Ask students to keep their answers in mind as they watch HAVANA CURVEBALL.

POST-VIEWING DISCUSSION:

Character and Story

- 1) Describe Mica.
 - What kind of a guy is Mica?
 - What's important to him?
 - Can you relate to Mica? Why or why not?
 - What challenges did Mica face in his quest to send baseball gear to Cuba? How did he react to these challenges?

HOW DOES MICA CHANGE DURING THE COURSE OF THE FILM?

- How does Mica change and grow during the course of the film?
- 2) Describe Mica's parents.
 - How are Mica's parents like or unlike your parents and your friends' parents?
 - What values do you think are important in Mica's family?
 - How do Mica's parents react when he tells them that he wants to send baseball equipment to Cuba?
 - How do you think your parents would react if you were to engage in a similarly complex project?
 - 3) Describe Mica's relationship with his grandpa.
 - How does Mica's relationship with his grandpa strengthen Mica's connection to baseball, Cuba, and his Jewish culture?
 - How does learning about his family history affect Mica? Have you ever discussed family history with your elders?
 - Why didn't Mica's grandpa want to go with them to Cuba?
 - How has Cuba changed since Mica's grandpa's time there?
 - How has U.S. perception of Cuba changed?
 - 4) How do you think Mica felt when he was in Cuba?
 - What were the most important parts of Mica's trip?
 - In which scenes did Mica form meaningful connections with people that he met?
 - In which scenes did you feel that it was challenging for Mica to connect across cultural boundaries?
 - Do you think Mica's visit to Cuba met his expectations? How was the experience different than what he expected?
 - Based on what you observed of Mica's experience,



do you think that engaging in community service is a good way to cross cultural boundaries? Why or why not?

5) When Mica reflects on his experience, he realizes he can't just do a good deed and become a *mensch* (a good person). What do you think he means by that?

Context

1) What did you learn about the relationship between Cuba and the United States through this film?

- Why can't we just mail things to Cuba?
- Why is there an embargo and when did it begin?
- What effect does the embargo have on the people of Cuba?
- Why does the embargo continue even as international relations have changed Cuba's strategic importance to U.S. foreign policy?

2) Describe Mica's process to find a way to travel to Cuba.

- Were you surprised by the legal regulations governing U.S. travel to Cuba?
- What do Mica's parents mean when they say that travel to Cuba is a "gray area"? When Mica and his family ultimately decide to go to Cuba, are they breaking the law?
- In a video chat, Manolo, who went to Cuba with the donation caravan, tells Mica that travelling illegally to Cuba would be a chance to challenge a law that he doesn't believe in. Do you think that this kind of activism is productive? Why or why not?
- Can you think of other instances in current events or in history when activists knowingly disobeyed laws to express dissent?

WHY CAN'T WE MAIL THINGS TO CUBA?

3) How does baseball help Mica connect with people in Cuba?

- List 3 moments in the film where Mica becomes closer to people through playing baseball or talking about baseball.
- Why do you think sports help people from different backgrounds connect?

- Have you ever had an experience where sports helped you to make friends with someone from a different background?
- What other hobbies or activities can build bridges among people from different backgrounds?

4) What did you learn about Judaism and Jewish history through watching HAVANA CURVEBALL?

- Why did Mica's grandfather live in Cuba for 2 years when he was a child?
- Why do you think this period in their family history is so important to Mica?

Why does he feel connected to Cuba?

- Why do you think that Jewish identity is important to Mica, even though he says himself that he is not religious?
- Do you think that Mica has fulfilled the challenges asked of him by the Bar Mitzvah process, or does he still have work to do?

5) How do you think Mica felt when he was playing baseball with the Cuban team?

- How was Mica like the Cuban players and how was he different?
- How do you think the Cuban guys felt about having Mica on their team?
- Why did Mica feel like he didn't want to hand the Cuban kids the donated equipment after they played together?
- What did Mica learn through that experience?



- the project? Why might the filmmakers have made this choice?
- How did the filmmaking process shape Mica's own understanding of his story?
- How might this story be different if it were fictional, rather than a documentary? Why might a storyteller choose to document a real story rather than creating a fictional account?

4) How do you think Mica's baseballs to Cuba project would have been different if there was no film about the process?

- Can documenting an action change the actual course of events?

POST-VIEWING ACTIVITIES:

1) Journaling exercise: Encourage students to examine their own experiences with activism, community service and learning beyond the classroom.

- Think about the moment in the film when Micah and his classmates learned about Cuba. Have you ever had an experience when your school learning touched your personal life?
- Have you ever done a community service project where you volunteered your time and your skills for a cause that you cared about?
- If so, why did you choose to work on that particular cause? If not, are there any causes that you might want to work for?
- What benefits did you/might you feel after working for a charitable cause?
- What effects did/might your actions have in the world? Do you think your actions can make the world a better place? Why?
- If you were challenged to make the world a better place, what kind of action would you take and why?

2) Activity: Make Media. Individually or as a group, identify someone who is a role model and who is doing good work in the world. This may be charitable work, or professional work, or work in the home or the family (like tutoring another family member).

- Create a list of interview questions to learn more about your role model's process and how he or she got involved with this work.
- Set up a date and time to interview your role model. You may interview your role model in writing, or make a video or audio interview. If you are making a video or recording audio, be sure to collect footage of your subject in action. This will make the interview more compelling. If you are writing an article, try taking a photograph to add context.
- Using the technology you have chosen, edit your interview into a format that you can share. This might be a blog post, a short video, or a podcast.
- Share the interviews in class. Get inspired!
- Consider posting your story, podcast, or video on the HAVANA CURVEBALL Facebook page or website to inspire others.

3) Assignment: Research youth activism online and on social media.

- Using the supplemental resources in this guide, research the work that youth activists are doing to make the world a better place.
- Find a group that is working toward a cause that you believe in. You may choose to get involved or just to follow their activities. There are lots of ways to participate besides direct action.
- Write a short report on the activities of your group, or go to a meeting or an event.
- Share your story on social media with #havanacurveball. Let other students know what you've been up to!

#HAVANACURVEBALL

California Media Literacy Standards Addressed In This Lesson:

- **Grade 6:** Standard 1.9 Identify persuasive and propaganda techniques used in television and identify false and misleading information.
- **Grade 7:** Standard 1.8 Analyze the effect on the viewer of images, text, and sound in electronic journalism; identify the techniques used to achieve the effects in each instance studied.
- **Grade 8:** Standard 1.9 Interpret and evaluate the various ways in which visual image makers (e.g., graphic artists, illustrators, news photographers) communicate information and affect impressions and opinions.
- **Grades 9 & 10:** Standard 1.14 Identify the aesthetic effects of a media presentation and evaluate the techniques used to create them (e.g., compare Shakespeare's Henry V with Kenneth Branagh's 1990 film version).
- **Grades 9 & 10:** Standard 1.2 Compare and contrast the ways in which media genres (e.g., televised news, news magazines, documentaries, online information) cover the same event.
- **Grades 11 & 12:** Standard 1.1 Recognize strategies used by the media to inform, persuade, entertain, and transmit culture (e.g., advertisements; perpetuation of stereotypes; use of visual representations, special effects, language); Standard 1.3 Interpret and evaluate the various ways in which events are presented and information is communicated by visual image makers (e.g., graphic artists, documentary filmmakers, illustrators, news photographers).

For more information about media literacy standards in your state, visit:

- MediaLiteracy.com: resources for advancing media education, United States Standards for media literacy education. <http://www.medialiteracy.com/standards.htm>
- Frank W Baker's guide to State Standards Which Include Elements of Media Literacy. http://frankwbaker.com/state_lit.htm

Common Core Standards Addressed In This Lesson:

This lesson addresses the English and Language Arts standards for Reading Informational Texts grades 5-12. Additional specific standard applications are listed below:

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2 Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3 Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.3 Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.



MEDIA LITERACY RESOURCES

SCREENING WITH MEANING

We live in a world where technology mediates a large portion of human interaction and the exchange of information. Every projected image, every word published on a page or a website, and every sound from a speaker reaches its audience through the medium, through the language of the device. The ability to parse the vast array of media messages is an essential skill for young people, particularly in a mainstream commercial culture that targets youth as a vulnerable, impressionable segment of the American marketplace. Most students already have a keen understanding of the languages different media use and the techniques they employ to inspire particular emotions or reactions, but they often lack the skill or awareness to fully deconstruct the messages they continuously receive.

Analysis of a media message—or any piece of mass media content—can best be accomplished by first identifying its principal characteristics:

- (1) Medium: the physical means by which it is contained and/or delivered
- (2) Author: the person(s) responsible for its creation and dissemination
- (3) Content: the information, emotions, values or ideas it conveys
- (4) Audience: the target audience to whom it is delivered
- (5) Purpose: the objectives of its authors and the effects of its dissemination.

Students who can readily identify these five core characteristics will be equipped to understand the incentives at work behind media messages, as well as their potential consequences. Media literacy education empowers students to become responsible consumers, active citizens and critical thinkers.



CORE CONCEPTS OF MEDIA ANALYSIS

MEDIUM	<p>All Media Is Constructed. How is the message delivered and in what format? What technologies are used to present the message? What visual and auditory elements are used?</p>
AUTHOR	<p>All Media Is Constructed by Someone. Who is delivering the message? Who originally constructed the message? What expectations do you have of the content, given its author(s)?</p>
CONTENT	<p>All Media Is A Language. What is the subject of the media message? What information, values, emotions or ideas are conveyed by the media content? What tools does the author employ to engage the viewer and evoke a response? To what extent did the content meet your expectations, given the format/author?</p>
AUDIENCE	<p>All Media Messages Reach an Audience. Who receives the message? For whom is the message intended? What is the public reaction to the media content and/or its message? What is your reaction to the media content and/or its message? How might others perceive this message differently? Why?</p>
PURPOSE	<p>All Media Messages Are Constructed for a Reason. Why was the message constructed? Who benefits from dissemination of the message? How? To what extent does the message achieve its purpose? What effect does the message have on the audience it reaches, if any?</p>



THE NON-FICTION FILM WHAT IS A DOCUMENTARY?

A documentary is a film whose goal is to capture truth, fact or reality as seen through the lens of the camera. But there are many kinds of documentaries, and not everyone's idea of truth is the same. The Scottish filmmaker John Grierson coined the term "documentary" in 1926 to describe American filmmaker Robert Flaherty's romanticized culture studies, but nonfiction filmmaking dates back to the earliest motion picture reels.

The definition of documentary expanded as filmmakers experimented with technology and the goals of nonfiction. Avant-garde documentarians, like Dziga Vertov in the 1920s, believed that the mechanical eye of the camera gave a truer image of reality than the human eye and pointed his lens at newly industrialized cities. Leni Reifenstahl's propaganda films from Nazi Germany used the nonfiction form to convey a political message, a slanted truth. The international cinema vérité or observational movements of the 1960s attempted to remove authorship from the documentary. The observational filmmaker hovered like a "fly on the wall" watching the world without commentary. Modern documentaries often seek to raise awareness about a social, environmental or political issue, guiding their audiences toward civic participation and activism.

While watching a documentary, it is important to remember the core concepts of media analysis: who made the film, for what audience and why? The nonfiction format can be deceptively subjective, as all filmmaking involves an inherent selection process: in the images that are shot, the music and narration that accompanies them and, most significantly, the way in which they are all edited together. Media literacy means always analyzing a documentary for its message and authorial intent.

A BRIEF TIMELINE OF THE DOCUMENTARY

1895 The Lumiere brothers developed the first motion picture film reels, capturing brief, unedited clips of life around them called "actualities" (e.g., *Train Arriving at the Station*)

1900-1920 Travelogue or "Scenic" films became popular, showcasing exoticised images from around the globe.

1926 John Grierson coined the term "documentary" to describe Robert Flaherty's romantic nonfiction film, *Moana*.

1929 Dziga Vertov, with the Soviet Kino-Pravda movement, released the experimental nonfiction film, *Man With a Movie Camera*.

1935 Leni Reifenstahl released *Triumph of the Will*, the infamous propaganda film that chronicled the 1934 Nazi Party Congress.

1939 John Grierson collaborated with the Canadian government to form the National Film Board of Canada, with the initial goal of creating Allied propaganda in support of the war.

1960s The cinema vérité movement began in Europe, shortly followed by "direct cinema" in the U.S. Portable cameras and sync sound allowed filmmakers to capture intimate footage with minimal intervention.

1968 The Argentine film, *La Hora de los Hornos (The Hour of the Furnaces)* opened the door to the activist cinema of the 1970s, which used film as a tool to counter capitalist and neo-colonial politics in Latin America.

1988 The US Congress mandated that the US government support the creation of independent non-commercial media, and the Independent Television Service (ITVS) was founded.

2000s The widespread use of digital cameras and editing software made the documentary medium vastly more affordable to independent and amateur filmmakers. Video sharing sites such as YouTube and Vimeo allowed amateur filmmakers to broadcast their work.

PRESENT DAY The term "documentary" has come to encompass a wide range of nonfiction cinema. Contemporary filmmakers continue to push the boundaries of truth in film and to explore new avenues and applications for the medium.



THE MAKING OF A DOCUMENTARY

Idea, Issue, Story.

Even though they are nonfiction films, most modern documentaries structure their content around a traditional story arc, with a beginning, middle and end, as well as characters, and a conclusion, theme or thesis to impart to the audience. Documentary filmmakers begin their projects with an idea or an issue that they wish to explore more deeply. Through research and planning, they develop a comprehensive plan before they begin shooting.

The Production Process.

To capture candid moments on film, modern documentary makers often leave the camera running, collecting far more footage than the final film requires. They may do this during interviews or in observational-style encounters with their subjects. To get increased access and an observational aesthetic, documentary makers often use handheld cameras and natural light, rather than staging a more formal filming environment.

Post-Production and the Documentary.

Because a documentary film relies upon candid footage, a large part of the film's construction occurs in the editing room, where you work with what you've captured. A documentary editor will sift through long interviews just to find a few phrases that will summarize the film's message. To emphasize important points and build the story, some documentaries use a voiceover,

an interview or a scripted narrative that brings candid footage together into a coherent statement. An original score can work alongside the voiceover to unify the footage and shape the mood of the film. Audiences often underestimate the power of sound to generate an emotional response. Many documentaries also use charts, graphs and historical footage to add context and emphasize key points.

Distribution.

Once a film is completed, the filmmaker needs to help it find its audience. Many documentaries are made independently on small budgets, but what's the point of all your work if no one hears your message? Some documentaries will be released in theaters around the country or get programmed on public or cable TV channels, but most documentary filmmakers will start by submitting their work to film festivals, in hopes of attracting distributors for the theater and television markets. Filmmakers may also make their films available online and use social media to reach their target audience.



SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES

Youth Activism:

<http://youthactivismproject.org/>

<https://www.dosomething.org/http>

<http://www.freechild.org>

Cuba & U.S. Relations:

Council on Foreign Relations: <http://www.cfr.org/cuba/uzsz-cuba-relations/p11113>

Time Magazine: A Brief History of US-Cuba Relations: <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1891359,00.html>

Huffington Post: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tag/us-cuba-relations>

Jewish History/Holocaust Remembrance:

Center for Jewish History : <http://www.cjh.org/>

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: <http://www.ushmm.org/learn>
<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007330>

Cuban Jewish Community:

NYT: In Cuba, Finding a tiny Corner of Jewish Life: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/04/travel/04journeys.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>

Jewish Virtual Library: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/vjw/Cuba.html>

Cuban Baseball:

<http://www.cubanball.com/history.html>

<http://www.pbs.org/stealinghome/history/>

http://www.baseball-reference.com/bullpen/History_of_baseball_in_Cuba

<http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/84jun/8406brown.htm>

Baseball Diplomacy:

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/feb/10/griffey-jr-larkin-do-baseball-diplomacy-in-cuba/?page=all>

<http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB12/nsaebb12.htm>

<http://www.bestthinking.com/trendingtopics/sports/baseball/u-s-cuban-baseball-diplomacy>



NOTES

Director's Statement

In 1997, we completed our first feature documentary, “The Return of Sarah’s Daughters” (<http://bit.ly/PW-RSD>), exploring the tension between tradition and modernity through the eyes of young women choosing a life both foreign and incomprehensible to us—Orthodox Judaism. While we disappointed the film’s subjects by remaining in the secular world, the film ends with the parting question: “Now that I have a child of my own, what will I pass on?”

HAVANA CURVEBALL picks up this thread as that child, Mica, now 13, begins his own journey into squaring his tradition and idealism with the realities of contemporary life. As HAVANA CURVEBALL tracks his growth from high-pitched boy to broad-shouldered young man, the audience has an unusual opportunity: to witness in real time the coming of age project to understand one’s family history while navigating the gap between youthful ideals and the complex, messy reality of the adult world.

It can be daunting to point the camera at your own family. But when we first pressed “record,” we thought we were making a little film about our son’s Bar Mitzvah service project. As the project grew in scope and complication, it became clear that a dramatic and entertaining story was unfolding in front of our lens. We couldn’t help but keep filming. Our unusual daily access made it possible to capture small details—Mica’s first shave, intimate moments with his grandfather, the frustrations and small triumphs of his journey. He was gracious enough to tolerate our filming. We owe a debt of gratitude to him and his grandfather for letting us observe and share their story. We hope it will inspire and provoke.

Dorcia & Ken

Statement from Mica

As a young boy traveling in Nicaragua, I had played baseball with the locals and their scrappy homemade equipment. When my synagogue announced the required Bar Mitzvah community service project, I immediately thought of that makeshift gear, and began to collect bats, balls, and mitts. I donated it to youth leagues in Cuba, the country that sheltered my grandfather during the Holocaust.

For three years, my family navigated around the U.S. foreign policy that threatened my project. With great effort, we sent twelve boxes of equipment. Finally, we went to Cuba, the last 300 pounds in tow.

I feared giving the equipment directly to kids. I feared facing the poverty, and recognizing my own privilege. Yet on my last day in Cuba, swept up in the moment, I offered my remaining gear to a group of kids playing street ball. They swarmed over me, grabbing and claiming the gear.

In that moment, I understood that my “huge” project was just a drop in their bucket. I felt both discouraged and vindicated. I had addressed the need—wasn’t that an admirable endeavor? Yet I had helped only a sliver of the needy with a sliver of donations. “My first reaction was to question the meaning of my “positive work.” I understand its value, but much remains unanswered. Regardless, I seek the fulfillment that this work provides. I board the train to seek deeper truths, not knowing where I will end up.

Mica J S