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INDEPENDENT LENS ON PBS EXAMINES BARRIERS TO ECONOMIC PROSPERITY AND RACIAL EQUALITY IN CITIES ACROSS AMERICA THROUGH “A RECKONING IN BOSTON,” PREMIERING JANUARY 17

A White Suburban Filmmaker Sets Out To Document the Experience of Low-income Students of Color in a Boston Night School, but Finds That It's His Own Education That Needs To Be Reckoned With

(San Francisco, CA) December 06, 2021—For filmmaker James Rutenbeck, “A Reckoning in Boston” started as an exploration of how engagement with the humanities can transform the lives of adults facing economic hardship and adverse circumstances. But after spending years among these students, Rutenbeck is forced to come to terms with a flawed film premise and his own complicity in racist structures. In time, the film narrative shifts and his subjects become his producing partners.

Hailed as “an absolute must-see” by *The Boston Globe*, “A Reckoning in Boston” premieres on PBS’s INDEPENDENT LENS, Monday, January 17, 2022 at 9:00 p.m. ET ([check local listings](#)). The film will also be available to stream on the PBS Video app.

Throughout the United States, the Clemente Course in the Humanities has given low-income adults—many of whom have experienced homelessness, transitioned out of incarceration, or faced financial barriers to a college education—a free opportunity to explore the great works of literature, art history, moral philosophy, and American history. In 2014, Rutenbeck, a white suburban filmmaker, came to Dorchester, Massachusetts, to document Clemente students and their engagement with the course. As he spent time outside the classroom with two students, Kafi Dixon and Carl Chandler, James began to question his ability to mediate their stories. Dixon and Chandler urged the filmmaker to turn the camera around and make himself as vulnerable as they have for him. In the process he was forced to reckon with the systemic racism that exists in communities in Boston and across the U.S., and his place within that system.

The film’s two initial main characters, Dixon, a 44-year-old Boston bus driver who explores her future as an African American farmer in the Northeast, and Chandler, a 66-year-old single father living on a small pension and disability payments, evolve from subjects to producers on the film as they guide Rutenbeck to find his voice throughout the narrative. The final result, “A Reckoning in Boston,” is a story narrated not only by Dixon and Chandler, but Rutenbeck as well. Dixon and



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Chandler work to overcome the violence, racism, and gentrification that threatens Boston, while filmmaker Rutenbeck faces his own relationship to racial and economic privilege.

“While making this film, I realized ever-present structural racism was something I could no longer ignore, and with the help of my subjects, co-producers and friends Kafi and Carl, we transformed the film. Our collaboration led to an honest and raw exploration of economic and racial inequality, in a city with a glaringly wide racial wealth divide.” said filmmaker James Rutenbeck. “I hadn’t really understood the lives of low-income people of color, and had failed to recognize my own complicity in the structures that were holding them back. Looking back now, there’s some irony in a white suburban filmmaker being encouraged to find and value his voice, by people whose stories he had set out to tell. I hope that is evident to viewers of our film.”

“A Reckoning in Boston” takes viewers inside Clemente classroom discussions on classic and contemporary texts, and into the lives of Dixon and Chandler as they both face eviction—shedding light on how rapid real estate development and gentrification propel inequality in Boston and other cities.

“We cannot overcome racial and economic inequalities if we continue to ignore that these disparities exist,” said subject and producer Kafi Dixon. “It was important that James come into the lives of Carl and I, and experience firsthand what it means to be evicted, and reckon with his own silence and how it contributes to racism and inequity. Through these life experiences, James became aware of his blind spots, and we came together to make a film that hopefully encourages others to speak up.”

Visit pbs.org/areckoninginboston for more information about the film.

About the filmmakers:

James Rutenbeck (Director/Co-Producer)

James Rutenbeck is a two-time recipient of the Alfred I. duPont-Columbia Journalism award. Notable films include “Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick?”, “Class of ‘27,” and “[Scenes from a Parish](#).” His work has appeared on America Reframed, American Experience, Independent Lens, *The Atlantic*, and *NYT Op-Docs*.

Kafi Dixon (Co-Producer)

Kafi Dixon founded Boston’s first cooperative for women and first worker-owned urban farm food co-op, initially named the Women of Color Co-op and later Common Good Co-op. Kafi produced “A Reckoning in Boston” in response to the socioeconomic experiences of lower-resourced and impoverished communities, and the intimacy of community violence experienced by women in Boston. Through this film, Kafi shares her experiences, hopes, and perspective as she asks us to



bear witness to the systemic violence and interrogate resolutions, one of which is the reclamation of agrarian space and farming for BIPOC communities.

Carl Chandler (Co-Producer)

Carl Chandler is a debut filmmaker and 3rd generation Bostonian. Carl credits his heritage—rich with Black, western European, and Indigenous ancestry—for his atypical perspective of the “American Dream.” Poor, but not impoverished, he enrolled in the Clemente Course after his daughter went to college. There he received a first-rate education, developed a creative collaboration with James Rutenbeck, and discovered a new direction for his life.

CREDITS

Directed, Written and Edited by	James Rutenbeck
Produced By	Carl Chandler Kafi Dixon James Rutenbeck
Co-Producer	Diana Fischer
Coordinating Producer	Heather Merrill
Executive Producers	Llewellyn Smith Anne Marie Stein Sally Jo Fifer Lois Vossen Noland Walker

About INDEPENDENT LENS

INDEPENDENT LENS is an Emmy® Award-winning weekly series airing on PBS Monday nights at 10:00 p.m. ET. The acclaimed series, with Lois Vossen as executive producer, features documentaries united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement, and unflinching visions of independent filmmakers. Presented by ITVS, the series is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding from PBS, Action Family Giving, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Wyncote Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. For more visit pbs.org/independentlens. Join the conversation on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram at @independentlens.



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