

Soul of Justice

Thelton Henderson's American Journey

DISCUSSION GUIDE

About The Film

This thought provoking film transports viewers through the inspiring life and work of Judge Thelton Henderson and serves as a provocative introduction to some of the most troubling social issues of the day-the role of the federal courts, the future of affirmative action, the need for prison reform and the need to protect the constitutional rights of the dispossessed.

From his early days growing up in Watts, to a promising but short-lived college football career, Thelton Henderson's mother convinced him he would grow up to be something. Fresh out of law school, the first African American attorney in the 1960's Civil Rights Division of the Kennedy Justice Department, Henderson confronted the challenge of being a black man in authority within the largely all-white world of the American legal system.

With rare and powerful footage, **Soul of Justice** offers viewers an intimate window into the world of the young lawyer as he grapples with tough choices including the decision to loan his car to Martin Luther King, Jr., a crucial act which ultimately cost him his job.

Chosen by President Jimmy Carter to be a federal judge, Henderson's career runs through the center of many of the most pressing and divisive issues of our time. From standing up to the US Commerce Department to halt the slaughter of dolphins by tuna industry practices, to overturning California's controversial affirmative action initiative and his rulings to reform the California prison system, Thelton Henderson demonstrates his belief that the law belongs to everyone.

Before Viewing

Soul of Justice is a 60 minute documentary. While some classes may have enough time to view the film in its entirety, the format of the program allows for dividing the viewing time into segments that focus on each of Thelton Henderson's influential cases and decisions.

Before viewing **Soul of Justice** students will benefit from an understanding of the 1960's Civil Rights movement and the origin of and controversy over affirmative action, including California's Civil Rights Initiative, Proposition 209.

The questions that follow may be used for discussion or as the basis for writing assignments and are designed to give young people an opportunity to:

- examine choices they make in their own lives and the factors that influence those choices.
 - gain an understanding of how the decisions on issues portrayed in the film (for example, affirmative action) can have a direct effect on their lives; and
 - explore ways they can make a difference in their own schools and communities.
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Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think this film is called Soul of Justice? What does the title mean?
2. It was said that Judge Henderson "looked at the law from the bottom up." What does this mean?
3. Which of Judge Henderson's controversial decisions portrayed in the film do you think was most important? Why?
4. Which of his decisions or choices took the most courage? Why?
5. Describe a time you (or someone you know) made a decision that took courage (for example, telling the truth even when you thought you would get into trouble, or standing up for something you knew was right even though it was unpopular.)
 - How did you feel?
 - What did you consider when making the decision?
 - What was the outcome of your choice?
6. What personal experiences, values or beliefs may have influenced Judge Henderson's feelings and ideas about affirmative action? What role should a judge's personal experience and values play in the decisions he or she makes?
7. Although Thelton Henderson had "few role models and no road map," Jackie Robinson, John Doar and Henderson's own mother were an inspiration to him. What did he admire about each of them? Who has been an inspiration in your life? How has your life changed as a result of knowing this person or knowing about him or her?
8. Thelton Henderson made a number of choices that changed his life. What were some of those choices? (For example, loaning his car to Martin Luther King, Jr.) What choices have you made that have changed your life?
9. If Henderson had known the risk he was taking when he loaned Martin Luther King, Jr. his car, do you think he would have made the same decision? Why or why not? How might things have been different if he had not loaned his car to King?
10. When he worked for the Justice Department Henderson said, "The thing I was torn by the most was whether I was going to be Joe Friday, well I just want the facts Ma'am and be quiet about my job, or whether I was going to hurl my body into the machine of injustice and make a huge statement." If you were in Henderson's position, what would you have done? What reasons would you give for your decision?
11. In the march that followed Medgar Evers' funeral, Henderson was concerned about the possibility of violence by the police, and he worked his way toward the back of the crowd. Why was John Doar able to step in between the demonstrators and the police to calm the situation?

12. How do you account for the fact that Henderson was hesitant to put himself on the front lines as a young Civil Rights Department lawyer but when he became a Federal Judge he took such courageous stands on the cases that came before him?
13. Civil disobedience is the deliberate breaking of a law by ordinary citizens, carried out as nonviolent protest or passive resistance.
- When is civil disobedience appropriate?
 - If the Civil Rights demonstrators had used violence in protesting segregation, what do you think would have happened?

When you are faced with a difficult or dangerous situation what alternatives to violence could you use?

14. In the Dolphin case, why did Judge Henderson rule to protect dolphins over the objections of the US Commerce Department? What reasons did he give to justify his ruling?
15. In his decision finding California's Prop 209 unconstitutional, Judge Henderson was criticized for overturning the "will of the people." Was Henderson wrong to overturn something the people voted for? Why or why not?
16. In his prison decision, Henderson ruled that even people at the "bottom of the social heap" have rights. What did he mean? How did Henderson use his position and authority to benefit people on the bottom?
17. In making this movie, the filmmaker made many choices about what to include about Thelton Henderson's life.
- List 3 specific parts of the film that caught your attention, and explain why you think the filmmaker chose to include them in **Soul of Justice**.
 - What else would you like to know about Henderson that you wish the filmmaker had included?
 - If someone were making a film about your life, what would you want them to say or show about you?
18. If you took one thing away from this film, what would it be? Why?