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A film by Katie Dellamaggiore

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[www.brooklyncastle.com](http://www.brooklyncastle.com)

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## **BROOKLYN CASTLE**

*Audience Award, SxSW*  
*Audience Award, Newport Beach Film Festival*  
*Top Ten Audience Favorite, Hot Docs*  
*Best New Director, Brooklyn Film Festival*

BROOKLYN CASTLE is the remarkable and improbable true story of I.S. 318 in Brooklyn; defying stereotypes, it has the highest ranked junior high chess team in the nation.

### **About the Team**

The I.S. 318 chess team currently has 85 members and has won thirty national championship chess titles—more than any other junior high school in the country. If Albert Einstein, whose skill level probably was around 1800, was to join the team, he'd only rank fourth.

In April of 2012 they became first junior high school team to become High School National Champions. They were honored in a ceremony with New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg and their triumph was featured on the front page of The New York Times.

### **Synopsis**

BROOKLYN CASTLE tells the stories of five members of the chess team at a below-the-poverty-line inner city junior high school that has won more national championships than any other in the country. The film follows the challenges these kids face in their personal lives as well as on the chessboard, and is as much about the sting of their losses as it is about the anticipation of their victories. Ironically, the biggest obstacle thrust upon them arises not from other competitors but from recessionary budget cuts to all the extracurricular activities at their school. BROOKLYN CASTLE shows how these kids' dedication to chess magnifies their belief in what is possible for their lives. After all, if they can master the world's most difficult game, what can't they do?

BROOKLYN CASTLE is driven by the compelling personalities of its characters: 11-year-old prodigy Justus is already one of America's highest-rated young chess players, and yet he often chokes, stymied by the expectations of others and his uncompromising belief in his destiny; Rochelle has the potential to become the first African-American female master in the history of

chess, but she struggles to find the balance between chess and academic success; charismatic leader Pobo caters to the emotional needs of his teammates, often at the expense of his own playing; shy Alexis, second-ranked in the school, sees chess as a way to get a better education and job to support his immigrant family; and Patrick, a sensitive beginner who is determined to use his modest goal of raising his chess ranking as a means to rise above his attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

The triumphs of the team can be credited in large part to the brilliant chess teacher /coach Elizabeth Spiegel and chess coordinator John Galvin, as well as the support and encouragement from their parents, but nothing would matter without the passion and time commitment the players bring to their study of the game. And while repeatedly winning is exhilarating, the team's victories go beyond a room full of trophies—through chess they learn patience and long-term planning, and the importance of analyzing the wrong or right decisions they make after the game. In essence, chess provides skills that will serve them well for the rest of their lives, regardless of what profession they choose.

The aspirations of the players are put in jeopardy by the financial crisis. The budget for their Brooklyn school, I.S. 318, is cut by more than a million dollars and they face the possibility that they will not have the money to attend tournaments they would probably win. The budget cuts are another difficult battle that school and the team must fight, but the players have learned through playing chess that every problem has a solution if you are willing to work hard enough to find it.

Through the inspirational stories of its characters, BROOKLYN CASTLE illustrates that the “extra” in extracurricular activities are not “extra”—they are essential to the teaching of what Principal Rubino calls “the whole child.” As Patrick’s story vividly demonstrates, programs like the chess team can be an indispensable way to open the door for all kinds of learning. For Justus, Patrick, Rochelle, Pobo and Alexis, chess is more than a game: it is a realm where they can transcend their reality and become kings and queens themselves. BROOKLYN CASTLE celebrates the hard work and determination that fires these young people’s pursuit of their dreams.

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## **BROOKLYN CASTLE**

### **Background and Notes**

**KATIE DELLAMAGGIORE (Director):** The idea for the film came from an article I read in the New York Times about Shawn Martinez, a talented chess player at Murrow High School in Midwood, Brooklyn, a neighborhood near where I grew up. At the time, Murrow had what was considered the best high school chess team in the nation, and were featured in a new book by sportswriter Michael Weinreb called *The Kings of New York*. I had always been interested in making a film about Brooklyn, but I wanted to tell a story that people didn't expect. There are so many negative, clichéd stereotypes about Brooklyn, and the fact that the best young chess players in the country were here in my hometown made me really proud. I met with Weinreb and he told me a lot of fascinating things about scholastic chess and his experiences writing the book. But he felt that the kids from Murrow were getting a lot of attention so he recommended I check out I.S. 318, the intermediate school that was feeding many top chess players into Murrow. They were featured in one chapter of his book and he said, "I wish I'd spent more time with them."

**JOHN GALVIN (Assistant Principal/Chess Coordinator, I.S. 318):** The chess program at I.S. 318 was started in 1997 by principal Alan Fierstein. It was called the "Chess Nuts" and it was a very small program with only ten students.

**ELIZABETH (nee VICARY) SPIEGEL (Chess Teacher, I.S. 318):** I started playing chess when I was in junior high school, just like the kids in the film, and I've played with enthusiasm all my life, but I'd done very little coaching before I began to work for Chess-in-the-Schools in 1999. I started coaching at I.S. 318 one day a week, but that quickly grew to one and a half school days and a tournament field trip every Saturday.

**JOHN GALVIN:** In 2000 we went to our first tournament, in Tucson Arizona. It was the first time our school had ever gone on an overnight trip, not to mention one by plane.

**ELIZABETH SPIEGEL:** We won the under 750 section, which is a beginners' section. It's not like we won the open section in one year—that would have been completely impossible. The second year we won the under 750 and the under 1000, and the year after that we won three of the sections. We did a lot of really focused hard work, every Saturday we would go to tournaments, and the program grew in size and quality each year. Eventually, Principal Fierstein offered me a job if I got my teaching license, so I went back to school to get my Masters. In the meantime I kept teaching classes, half paid and half as a volunteer. I began full time at 318 in 2006-2007, and now teach 8 year-long classes a week that meet 2-5 times each: the kids do homework, take tests, and get grades and credit for them.

**KATIE DELLAMAGGIORE:** I.S. 318 is very near where I live in Williamsburg, so I went over there one day and met John and Elizabeth. As soon as I walked in to the room I was amazed. The kids were engaged and happy and she was sitting with them and going over their games. Elizabeth is so compelling as a teacher that even though I didn't understand what she was talking about, it was riveting to watch her.

At that point, I started going back to the school with my then boyfriend **Nelson Dellamaggiore (Producer/Editor)** and brother **Brian Schulz (Producer/Cinematographer)**, and began interviewing the kids, but we had to stop when Nelson and I got engaged. We decided between planning our wedding and our full-time jobs we couldn't even comprehend how we could raise the money and start making the movie. Still, we kept in touch with John and Elizabeth for the next year and went to some tournaments to observe and spend time with them.

Nelson and I were married in September 2008 and when we got back from our honeymoon I said, "we need to make the movie *now*." The first thing I did was talk with the kids one on one. I asked them questions about their lives to find out if they had some kind of goal or struggle—there had to be something for us to follow. We never wanted to make a chess competition movie where all they did was win all the time; it wouldn't have been interesting to us without their personal struggles. Their stories came out naturally in conversation: Alexis talked about the test, Patrick wanted to get better, and Rochelle wanted to be the first African-American female master. I also knew that Rochelle would be making the transition to high school and that would be interesting to see how she balanced that. The only one who didn't have an obvious struggle was Pobo—he hadn't decided to run for school president when I met him—but he had such a great personality that there was no way I could have passed up choosing him. And Justus was coming in the next school year and with the highest rating. So it made sense to me to have Justus, with all the expectation of him being the new leader of the team, come into the school just as Rochelle was leaving.

I also met with each of their parents as I knew that they would become characters in the film too. It was important to know that the parents were proud of their kids and wanted to have conversations about what was happening with them. And they all opened up. John Galvin told me from the start that 99% of the kids who were on the team had supportive parents. So we had our five kids and their parents were all willing to be involved.

Justus definitely has a gift. I think it's like being an athlete, sometimes you have that gift and sometimes you don't. There's only so much practice you can do to get better if you don't really have it. Not everybody is going to get as good as he is. He is shy, but also cool—he doesn't give up too much. He's also very observant. When he says something, he thinks about what he's going to say before he says it and makes sure it's the right thing. I'd say, "tell me more," and he'd say one sentence. He's so thoughtful and measured on the chessboard and in real life he's very much the same way. He's a little mysterious. I think that's why I like him.

I found out two or three months after I met him that Pobo was going to run for school president. In a way, he was already a politician. He had these really adult views for a seventh grader about what it meant to be from an immigrant family, what he thought the American Dream was, what his responsibility was as a citizen, and what the government's responsibility was. He told me he would watch Keith Olbermann with his uncle and they would get all fired up about politics. When he came up with that "Pobama" line I thought, "are you serious?" You can't write things like that.

Rochelle really struggled through the whole year we were shooting with her about not wanting to play chess anymore. Elizabeth told me that that's what happened with kids, particularly with girls, when they go to high school—they get wrapped up in a social life and are torn because

they want to do well academically. I knew that for the movie whatever happened would be interesting, but personally I didn't want her to quit because she had so much potential.

Alexis was shy, but you could always tell there was a lot going on beneath the surface. Right when I first met him he told me he was thinking about the specialized high school exam. And the importance of the test was tied to this wanting to do good for his parents and hopefully make enough money to care of them one day. When I met his mom, she told me how Alexis always needed to get the perfect grade and do everything correctly. He's the youngest child, his siblings are each eight or nine years older than him, and I think he was observing the career paths that his other siblings had taken, and he didn't want to do that.

Patrick brought up his ADHD right away, but I didn't really want to pursue it as his story, as things like that can become clichéd really quickly. But he kept bringing it up. I thought it was so interesting that a kid that young would have so much awareness about what was going on with him. Maybe it's a generational thing—kids these days have more information—but if I was his age I don't know if I would be able to speak about stuff like that so openly and comfortably. And his mom was the same way; it was obviously something that was always on their mind. And then he told me he believed that if he could become a better chess player it would make him a better student. And I think all of the kids in the chess program believe that. It gives them an extra boost of confidence that they're good at something that seems to outsiders as terribly difficult.

**ELIZABETH SPIEGEL:** I don't expect my students to become professional chess players—that's not the point of the program. I want them to learn how to attack a problem on their own. The thing that's great about chess as an educational tool, and I think this is the same with musical instruments, is that kids are able to teach themselves because they can get feedback that doesn't need to be mediated by a teacher. If you play a wrong note, you hear it; if you make a bad move, you lose. You can't avoid confronting the reality that you made a bad move. The most effective way to improve at chess is to play through your games afterward, alone or preferably with a teacher, and figure out what you did well and what you can do better. I ask the kids to think about questions like "What are your typical cognitive mistakes? Why are you losing and can you become conscious of it so you won't make that mistake in the future?" I think that teaching the mental habit of going over what you've done and learning from it is a hugely important part of what chess offers in a kid's education. It's a magical thing when kids are suddenly grasp the idea that they can fix their problems just by thinking about them.

**JOHN GALVIN:** Chess is unique because it teaches certain skills like patience, long-term planning, and that every move has a consequence. But what we try to do with chess at I.S. 318—and all our other programs like music, robotics, judo—is teach kids that if you really work hard and are dedicated that you can be really great at something. Hopefully you can take those persistence skills and transfer them into your adult life.

**ELIZABETH SPIEGEL:** For example, maybe one of my students will go into science and be doing some original research project. I hope that because they have studied chess, they will have the confidence and the know-how to understand the parameters of the problem, to know how to start looking for solutions, how to test their ideas, how to figure out if they're making progress.

**KATIE DELLAMAGGIORE:** The kids had struggles on the chessboard and in their personal lives, but then there was the even bigger problem with the school budget cuts. When John was confronted with loss of all the money he said, “What am I going to do? Tell them that we can’t go to Nationals! That’s ridiculous. We teach the kids that for every problem on the chessboard there’s a solution.”

**ELIZABETH SPIEGEL:** I think that chess teaches optimism: it teaches kids to *expect* to be able to solve problems. It demonstrates that they just have to figure out what the problem is and they’ll find a solution.

**KATIE DELLAMAGGIORE:** We’re hoping the film can play a role in finding a solution to the budget mess. I think that when lawmakers are faced with cutting a budget, they know they can’t cut core programs like reading and math or science, they have to pay the teachers, so the first things to go are the things they see as “extra.” But what one person might consider “extra” might be a kid’s reason for showing up for school. It’s easy to cut programs like chess because you’ve never seen what it’s actually doing on the ground in a really personal way for kids. And when people see the movie, they get that.

I didn’t go into this movie wanting to make something that had a political view, but I feel very strongly now that if you expect public education to succeed you have to invest in it. You can’t cut programs and resources and then ask, “why aren’t you guys doing any good?” Everybody’s always saying that the system is broken so we have to come up with an entirely new model. But why do we have to start from scratch? Why can’t we identify things that are working and use them as examples? I also find it frustrating to hear the tired story about lazy overpaid teachers who are just waiting to retire or collect their pensions. I didn’t experience that at all with the teachers at I.S. 318. People are so used to hearing the stories about lazy teachers that it’s nice to be able to show teachers at a below poverty line school who really care.

I hope people who see the movie are inspired in some way to do what they can in their community: if they’re a teacher, hopefully they will feel inspired to go back to their school and create a new afterschool program on their own; or a parent might feel inspired to go to more PTA meetings and be more involved; or a kid could imagine a little bit more about what he or she can do. Even if you’re not a teacher or a parent or a student I think it will make you feel good. It will make you feel hopeful that good things like this are happening.

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## **BROOKLYN CASTLE**

### **About the Players**

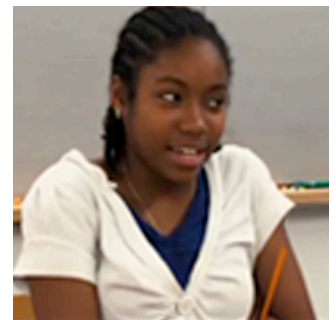
#### **JUSTUS WILLIAMS, 11, 6th Grade**

Possessing a natural gift for chess, Justus is a rising star in the scholastic chess world. At just 11 years old, he is already rated 2100 and has been selected to join the United States Chess Federation’s esteemed All-American team — one of the highest national honors attainable by a young chess player. Justus struggles with the unwanted attention his immense talent commands, as well as the sky-high expectations it raises.



#### **ROCHELLE BALLANTYNE, 13, 8th Grade**

Having found chess at I.S. 318 to be a boy’s club, Rochelle was driven to prove she could not only be a formidable opponent against her male peers, she could outdo them. Three years later, she became the highest-rated player at the school, with the potential to become the first African-American female Master in the history of chess. But her world has changed since she began high school, and she isn’t sure that she can do her best academically while also devoting a large part of her week to the study of chess.



#### **POBO EFEKORO, 12, 7th Grade**

A charismatic student and natural politician, Pobo emerges as a big brother figure and leader to the other chess team members. Dubbing himself “Pobama,” the ambitious 12-year-old mounts a campaign to become president of the school, with the goal of restoring budget cuts that threaten I.S. 318’s afterschool programs, including chess. Driven by the memory of his late father, Pobo confronts challenges with a single-minded focus on success, teamwork and character.





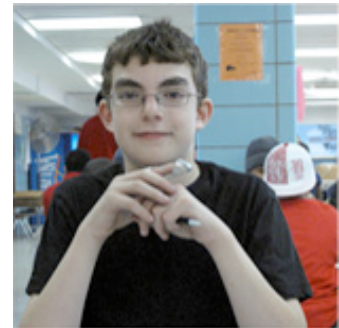
**ALEXIS PAREDES, 12, 7th Grade**

A meditative, thoughtful chess player, Alexis is the number two-rated member of the I.S. 318 team. He sees chess, and entrance to one to New York City's top tier public high schools, as the first step on the road to a promising career that will allow him to support his immigrant parents. But getting into a great school is based on the result of a single exam, and Alexis suffers under the strain of pressure from both outside and within.



**PATRICK JOHNSTON, 11, 7th grade**

For Patrick, who has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, chess is more than a game; he sees it as a way to learn focus, concentration and patience. While he is almost the lowest-rated player on the team, he has set himself the modest goal of raising his ranking to a middle level. In his devotion to his task he displays impressive diligence as well as a bracing determination: Patrick won't be satisfied with a lesson about the importance of trying his best; Patrick wants to win.



## **BROOKLYN CASTLE**

### **I.S. 318 Staff**

#### **ELIZABETH SPIEGEL**

##### **Coach/Chess Teacher**

Born in the UK, Spiegel (nee Vicary) moved to the US at age seven. She started playing in junior high school and played competitively through her college years. After college she took a number of jobs unrelated to chess, including writing encyclopedia articles and working as the assistant to a Jordanian princess. She began teaching at I.S. 318 under the auspices of the non-profit Chess-in-the-Schools, and taught additional advanced classes there as a volunteer. In 2006, she completed her Masters in education and was hired by the school to be their full time chess teacher. Her teaching methods combine intensive analysis of the players' own games with problem-solving, openings, endgames, and strategy. Spiegel writes a blog about her life and work as the I.S. 318 chess coach.



#### **JOHN GALVIN**

##### **Assistant Principal/Chess Coordinator**

Now in his 17th year at I.S. 318, Galvin is a veteran educator, dedicated chess coordinator and firm adherent of the notion that talent and hard work lead to success. He's tough but supportive and his high expectations have led to the culture of success that pervades I.S. 318. When the Wall Street financial crisis begins to impact the school, he mounted a community-wide campaign to push against funding cuts, and employed budgetary wizardry to save vital afterschool programs at I.S. 318.



#### **FRED RUBINO**

##### **Principal**

In Principal Rubino's 25 years at I.S. 318 he's witnessed how high-quality after school programs can turn a school around, and it's made him a fierce defender of the school's innovative activities. Deeply committed to his students, he faces budget cuts with dogged determination to keep I.S. 318's programs intact, and ensure every student has access to the resources they needed to excel.



## **BROOKLYN CASTLE**

### **About the Filmmakers**

#### **KATIE DELLAMAGGIORE (Director/Producer)**

Katie is a documentary producer and director whose work has appeared on MTV, A&E, HBO/Cinemax and VH1. She has held various production and outreach roles on award-winning documentaries including 39 POUNDS OF LOVE, TO DIE IN JERUSALEM, 51 BIRCH STREET and AMERICAN TEEN. Katie co-produced After the Storm, a nonprofit theater and film project that used art to revitalize the lives of young people in post-Katrina New Orleans, and directed, produced and shot “UR Life Online” for A&E Classroom, which explored sexual solicitation and cyber bullying and received an Emmy nomination for Single Camera Editing. In 2010, she and her husband, Nelson, co-founded television and film production company Rescued Media. BROOKLYN CASTLE, Katie’s feature directorial debut, has received support from IFP Independent Film Week, Chicken & Egg Pictures, The Fledgling Fund, and Britdoc’s The Good Pitch.

#### **NELSON DELLAMAGGIORE (Editor/Producer)**

Nelson is a three-time Emmy Award Nominee in the field of editing, most notably for Single Camera Editing on A&E’s “UR Life Online,” directed, produced and shot by Katie Dellamaggiore. He was also nominated for his work on “Super Bowl XLI” as well as the “Wizard at 95” for ESPN. He’s worked on a wide variety of formats, from Comedy Central’s “Chappelle’s Show” to MTV’s “TRL” to “The Tony Awards” and even “The Beijing Olympic Games.” Nelson is a graduate of the University of Florida College of Journalism and Communications.

#### **BRIAN SCHULZ (Director of Photography/Producer)**

Brian is a three-time New York Emmy Award winning cinematographer for Major League Baseball Productions. As one of MLB’s lead cinematographers he is dispatched across the country to capture the game’s most dramatic images. A veteran of numerous All Star games and World Series his creativity behind the film and HD camera can be found in network promos and specials, World Series DVDs and the EMMY winning YES Yankeeography series. Brian is a graduate of the University of Connecticut.

#### **ROBERT McLELLAN (Executive Producer)**

Robert is a senior marketing professional whose clients have included top 10 recording artists and major record labels as well as publishers, film studios, Internet companies and advertising agencies. He has worked on campaigns for Michael Jackson, the NFL and Fortune 500 companies including Pepsi, Sony, Ford and Toyota. Robert is currently the marketing director for the United States Chess Federation.

#### **NEAL FLAHERTY (Co-Executive Producer)**

Neal has been working in music, television and feature films for more than 10 years. He began his career as an assistant to then Chairman, CEO, COO and President of Sony Music Worldwide, Tommy Mottola. After two years at Sony, Flaherty began working in television for Spike TV and “The Tonight Show with Jay Leno.” He then transitioned into the world of feature films, working for production companies LivePlanet and Benderspink. Flaherty worked on THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT, AMERICAN WEDDING, MONSTER IN LAW, RED EYE, JUST FRIENDS and Golden Globe Best Picture nominee A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE. He is attached to producing and selling scripts to Dreamworks, Paramount, Dark Castle, Bold, and Lionsgate.

**BROOKLYN CASTLE**

**The Players**

ROCHELLE BALLANTYNE  
POBO EFEKORO  
PATRICK JOHNSTON  
ALEX PAREDES  
JUSTUS WILLIAMS

**Chess Teacher/Coach**

ELIZABETH (nee VICARY) SPIEGEL

**Assistant Principal**

JOHN GALVIN

**Principal**

FRED RUBINO

**Featuring**

JAMES BLACK

MICHELLE BRATHWAITE (Rochelle's mother)

CHRISTIANA INUWERE (Pobo's mother)

LISA JOHNSTON (Patrick's mother)

VIVIANA PAREDES TOLEDO (Alexis's mother)

LATISHA WILLIAMS (Justus's mother).

**The Filmmakers**

Director KATIE DELLAMAGGIORE

Producers KATIE DELLAMAGGIORE  
NELSON DELLAMAGGIORE  
BRIAN SCHULZ

Director of Photography BRIAN SCHULZ

Editor NELSON DELLAMAGGIORE

Executive Producers GEOFF GIBSON  
ROBERT McLELLAN

Executive Producers CHICKEN AND EGG PICTURES

JULIE PARKER BENELLO  
WENDY ETTINGER  
JUDITH HELFAND

Co-Executive Producers NEAL FLAHERTY  
LE CASTLE FILM WORKS

Original Music B. SATZ for LE CASTLE

Consulting Editor for Chicken and Egg Pictures MARY MANHARDT

Outreach Director KALI HOLLOWAY

Associate Producers ELLIOT NEFF, CHESS4LIFE  
RAPHAEL NEFF, CHESSHOUSE

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