Charming Doc ‘Brooklyn Castle’ Celebrates Young Chess Champions

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- Brooklyn Castle [2]
- Elizabeth Spiegel [3]
- HollywoodChicago.com Content [4]
- Intermediate School 318 [5]
- John Galvin [6]
- Justus Williams [7]
- Katie Dellamaggiore [8]
- Matt Fagerholm [9]
- Movie Review [10]
- PDA [11]



Rating: **3.5**/**5.0**

CHICAGO – One of the greatest casualties of America’s economic crisis is the extracurricular activities at high schools and middle schools. Whereas the primary subjects fill students’ heads with knowledge, after-school programs provide them with a place to apply it. It’s in the hours following the standard daily curriculum where much of the learning and growing takes place.

That’s certainly true of the chess team at Brooklyn’s Intermediate School 318. Many of these students live below the poverty line, but their challenging circumstances haven’t prevented their intellects from soaring. Under the tutelage of teacher Elizabeth Spiegel and assistant principal John Galvin, these supremely gifted kids have garnered more championships than any other middle school in the country. At the ages of 11, 12 and 13, these students are routinely demolishing their competition, which includes players in high school.

One of documentarian Katie Dellamaggiore’s many strengths is her refusal to sugar-coat the legacy of her extraordinary subjects. Her film, “Brooklyn Castle,” devotes equal amounts of screen time to the failures as well as the successes of the I.S. 318 chess team, as the sudden sting of loss temporarily derails the students’ otherwise peerless concentration. 11-year-old Justus Williams is a chess prodigy who struggles with the stress of enormous expectations. When he momentarily struggles during a game, it’s difficult for him to get back on track. Galvin attempts to boost the boy’s confidence level by teaching him the meaning of “swagger,” but doesn’t mince words when informing him that “we’re all relying on you.” It initially seems as if Dellamaggiore’s presence may be having an adverse effect on the proceedings, but it’s not long before Justus and his teammates manage to bring home their latest slew of trophies. Nearly stealing the show is 12-year-old Pobo Efekoro, who could likely teach a master class in swagger. While running for class president, Pobo dubs himself, “Pobama,” yet his popularity hasn’t caused him to ignore his more introverted peers, such as 11-year-old Patrick Johnston. Though his battles with ADHD are a constant obstacle in his educational life, the chess team’s embracement of students with various skill bases allows Patrick to compete (Pobo serves as his mentor).



The I.S. 318 chess team practices on the way to its latest competition in Katie Dellamaggiore’s Brooklyn Castle.
Photo credit: PDA

An area where the film comes up short is its exploration of the game of chess itself, and how it sharpens the intellect of its players. The camera often maintains a respectful distance from the players as they partake in their high-pressure games, while Dellamaggiore relies on her interviews to give the moment-to-moment maneuvering its proper context. Spiegel’s dynamism is readily apparent in the classroom, as she guides her class toward problem-solving techniques that will enable them to think for themselves. She later argues that the game helps her students understand that the “truth isn’t quite as simple as right and wrong,” while illustrating that there are endless pathways toward achieving success. Though all of the children are well-behaved, the agony of defeat does threaten to make them a prisoner of their emotions. After enduring several losses, it’s wonderful to see Patrick score his first win, enabling him to finally bask in the empowerment that such a success can bring. 13-year-old Rochelle Ballantyne is under a different sort of pressure, as she finds herself inching closer and closer toward becoming the first African-American female Master in the history of chess, and must decide whether she wants to devote her life toward achieving that goal.

Of course, the biggest challenge facing this team is not in the form of formidable competitors but budget cuts that threaten to dismantle all of the after-school programs, which would ultimately strip I.S. 318 of everything that distinguishes it as such an exceptional school. In an unusually frank moment, Galvin lashes out at the “corrupt bankers” whose misdeeds have caused his kids to suffer, causing a surprised Spiegel to utter, “That’s the most liberal thing I’ve heard you say.” Though the students and staff remain upbeat and hopeful throughout the film, which also chronicles their various fundraising efforts, the urgency of the school’s plight remains after the final fade out. There’s an inevitable title card informing viewers of how they can donate online, but “Brooklyn Castle” is more than a mere feature-length fundraising video. It is an observant and heartfelt tribute to the enriching power of a well-rounded education that leaves one prepared for life rather than just the latest exam.



The I.S. 318 chess team celebrates its latest victory in Katie Dellamaggiore’s Brooklyn Castle.
Photo credit: PDA

That being said, is “Brooklyn Castle” worth seeing in theaters? It may be better suited for television than the big screen, yet it could certainly make a worthy field trip destination—not just for classes but administrators, particularly those whose exorbitant paychecks threaten vital programs for students. Show me an administrator who leaves Dellamaggiore’s film feeling unmoved, and I’ll show you someone who has no business being in eduction.

‘Brooklyn Castle’ stars Pobo Efekoro, Rochelle Ballantyne, Alexis Paredes, Justus Williams, Patrick Johnston, Elizabeth Spiegel, John Galvin and Fred Rubino. It was directed by Katie Dellamaggiore. It was released November 2nd at the Landmark Century Centre Cinema. It is rated PG.


[12]

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