

## UNARMED VERSES



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# UNARMED VERSES

Directed by Charles Officer

2016 | Canada | 86 min

## TEACHER'S GUIDE

This guide has been designed to help teachers and students enrich their experience of *Unarmed Verses* by providing support in the form of questions and activities. There are a range of questions that will help teachers frame discussion with their class, activities for before, during and after viewing the film, and some weblinks that provide starting points for further research or discussion.

### The Film

Toronto Community Housing's Villaways neighbourhood was built in the 1970s in an isolated and marginalized part of the city. It's been designated for redevelopment between 2016 and 2019, and during construction all the current residents will be relocated. The revitalization promises a fresh start, but for those who call Villaways home, the transition is a major disruption amidst their ongoing struggles. For Francine Valentine, an insightful 12-year-old growing up in the area, her world revolves around her friends and family. By joining the local Arts Starts's Up & Rooted music program she embraces the opportunity to express herself with honesty and beauty. Entering her adolescent years, Francine has already witnessed the hard realities that surround her and other teenage kids. Both the program and the film share that unique perspective. Through her words and following her daily routines, Charles Officer has created a poetic work of cinema that transcends social observation.

Alexander Rogalski

Source: <https://www.hotdocs.ca>

### The Filmmaker

Charles Officer holds citizenship in Canada and the United Kingdom. He studied at Cambridge University and graduated from the Ontario College of Art and Design. Charles worked as a graphic designer and creative director in Toronto before attending the Neighborhood Playhouse School of Theatre in New York. In 2002, Charles completed the Director Lab at the Canadian Film Centre with *Short Hymn\_Silent War* (TIFF 2002, Sundance 2004) and earned his first Genie nomination in 2004. His debut feature *Nurse.Fighter.Boy*, premiered at TIFF in 2008, screened internationally and garnered 10 Genie nominations including Best Picture and Best Director. Charles made *Playback* magazine's "10 to Watch" list in 2009 and received the Ontario Premier's Emerging Artist Award that same year. His documentary, *Mighty Jerome*, won four Leo Awards and a 2012 Regional Emmy Award. He was also the recipient of Hot Docs' Don Haig Award of Merit in 2012. Charles followed with the *Engraved on a Nation* documentary series, which won a 2014 Canadian Screen Award. He has directed episodes of acclaimed television series *Rookie Blue*, *Saving Hope*, *Private Eyes* and recently worked on the new CBC drama *21 Thunder*. *Unarmed Verses* is his latest feature documentary, produced by the National Film Board of Canada.

Source: Charles Officer

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## VIEWING THE FILM WITH STUDENTS

The following three subsections are intended to provide you with a range of Pre-Viewing, Viewing and Post-Viewing activities. They are followed by a set of questions based upon the film's larger thematic domains, some follow-up questions and quotations, sample curricular outcomes and a page of weblinks for further investigation.

### Pre-Viewing Activities

In small groups, have students locate Villaways (also called Leslie Nymark) on a map of Toronto and research facts about the community. Ask students to analyze the arrangement of the streets and homes in Villaways, as well as the geographical location of the neighbourhood in relation to parks, waterways, public services, commercial areas, etc.

As a class, have students share their ideas and perceptions about community revitalization, also called urban revitalization. What does it mean to revitalize something? How is it possible to revitalize a community?

In a class discussion, have students reflect on how different art forms are used to express an individual's voice or sense of self. Ask students to write about how they have used or could use a specific art form to build confidence or find their own voice.

### Viewing Activities

Have students complete the PBS viewing guide on documentaries (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/docs/Copies%20of%20Viewing%20Guide.pdf>). Students can revisit their completed documents as a Post-Viewing Activity.

Have students jot down three to five ideas for discussion, or questions that the film raises in their minds. As an Extension and/or Post-Viewing Activity, students can enter their questions into an online response or polling system and can vote on the questions or issues they would like to explore in further detail. Encourage students to use multiple levels of Bloom's Taxonomy.

As they watch, have students paraphrase one quotation from the film that they feel is especially interesting or inspiring. After the film, students can share the quotation they documented and why this quotation stood out for them.

Have students make notes on one or more of the individuals from the film. What words would you use to describe their individual personalities? What are they inspired by?

As they watch, have students make notes about daily life in the Villaways community, as it is depicted in the film. What do they notice? What images or scenes stand out?

### Post-Viewing Activities

Discuss with students their initial reactions to the film and the featured individuals. Did their feelings evolve over the course of the film? Was there an individual or a part in the film that resonated with them?

*Unarmed Verses* depicts life in Villaways, but the film also includes many shots of iconic Toronto landmarks. As a class, make a list of all the Toronto sites students can recall from the film.

Have students choose one of the quotations that they paraphrased from the Viewing Activity and write a reflection or response to that quote.

*Unarmed Verses* shows another side of the Villaways revitalization project, as it is perceived by Francine, her family and the other residents of the community. Ask students to research the revitalization project and have them engage in a two-sided debate from the perspective of the Villaways residents and the perspective of the Toronto Community Housing Corporation and Tridel.

Like Villaways, the community of Regent Park in Toronto is also undergoing a revitalization that involves relocating local residents in order to build new housing complexes. Have students research both the Villaways and Regent Park revitalization projects and compare the changes affecting both communities using a Venn diagram.

Ask students to form small groups and discuss the connection between art, community, identity and self-expression that they saw in the film. Have them record the main ideas from their discussion in a mind map. At the end of the activity, have each group briefly share their mind map with the class.

Art Starts plays an important role in supporting youth from Villaways and allowing them to develop their artistic talents. Have students visit the Art Starts website (<http://www.artstarts.net>) and watch the video entitled "Our Manifesto" at the bottom of the home page. Ask students to identify the organization's goals. How did they see these goals reflected in *Unarmed Verses*?

A scene in the film shows Francine's visit to the Jean-Michel Basquiat exhibit at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Francine comments that Basquiat's art is "unique" and she says that in his work, "there's so much more meaning, and that's where you get the beauty of the art." Ask students to reflect on the relevance of this scene to the overall film. Have students research Basquiat's artwork and biography and share their impressions of his work.

The film features the spoken word poetry of Lavane Kelly, the young man from the Art Starts program who acts as a mentor to Francine. Have students watch the NFB's short clip of Lavane's poem from the documentary (<https://vimeo.com/188683256>). Use the following free-writing prompts: How does this poem make you feel? What impressions or sensations come to mind when hearing the poem for a second time? Ask students to use these questions as starting points and write whatever comes to mind. Rules for free-writing: write for a set amount of time (between two and five minutes); do not stop writing; do not rush but also do not go too slowly; do not cross anything out or fix your writing; ignore grammar and spelling rules and just allow your ideas to flow freely; if you do not know what to write, write "I don't know what to write" until another idea comes to mind.

At the beginning of the film, Francine relates how she immigrated to Canada from Antigua at an early age with her father. Have students locate Antigua on a map and conduct some background research about the country. Ask students to compare Antigua and Canada in terms of climate, geography, economy, culture, population, history, etc.

Have students complete an exit note. The exit note should contain one idea that demonstrates what they learned from the film, as well as one question that they still have about the topic.

## WEBSITES AND ONLINE RESOURCES

### About the Film

<http://www.canesugarfilmworks.com>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/canesugar>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/cane.sugarfilmworks>

### Additional Resources

*Art Starts:* Featured in *Unarmed Verses*, Art Starts is the non-profit organization which delivers accessible, community-building arts programs to neighbourhoods in Toronto.

<http://www.artstarts.net>

*Inside Toronto:* The article "Leslie Street and Sheppard Avenue Area Residents of Housing Complex See Both Sides of Revitalization Project" offers a description of the re-development of Villaways as well as residents' perspectives on the revitalization project.

<http://www.insidetoronto.com/toronto/> Type "Leslie Sheppard revitalization" into the search function of the website.

*Jean-Michel Basquiat:* Students can discover the life and works of Jean-Michel Basquiat on the artist's official website. The site features an interactive timeline of Basquiat's life as well as some images of his work.

<http://www.basquiat.com>

*Leslie Nymark Revitalization:* This basic webpage was intended to track public consultation throughout the revitalization process. While there is not much content on the site, it does include a description of the project as well as aerial images of the current and proposed housing models for the community.

<http://villaways.ca>

*NFB Blog:* The article, "Unarmed Verses: Singing their Own Song" provides background information about the film, director Charles Officer and the Villaways community.

<http://blog.nfb.ca/> Type the title of the article into the search function of the website.

*Project Voice:* Project Voice uses spoken word poetry to entertain, educate and inspire. The organization's website features videos of spoken word performances, including an inspiring TED talk by the organization's co-founder, Sarah Kay.

<http://www.projectvoice.co>

*Rise Edutainment:* Based in Toronto, Rise Edutainment provides a platform for spoken word and performance artists. Students can explore their website, which features information about the organization, videos of performers and upcoming events.

<http://riseedutainment.com>

*Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC):* Students can explore the revitalization of Villaways, officially called Leslie Nymark, on the TCHC website. The Leslie Nymark page provides a brief overview of the revitalization project and its expected timeline.

<https://www.torontohousing.ca/> Type "Leslie Nymark" into the search function of the website.

*Toronto Star:* The June 16, 2015, article "Filmmaker Charles Officer Wants the Young Residents of Villaways Neighbourhood to Tell Their Stories in Doc" provides an informative introduction to *Unarmed Verses*. Students can read the article to understand the context of the film before watching it.

<https://www.thestar.com/> Type "Charles Officer" into the search function of the website.

*Tridel Scala:* Students can critically explore the upscale branding of Tridel's new Scala condominium complex that will replace the Villaways neighbourhood. The page features a video of the luxury condos, as well as images of the new designs, prices, floorplans, amenities and descriptions of the "Bayview Village" neighbourhood.

<http://www.tridel.com/scala/>

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

### Questions for Pre-Viewing or Post-Viewing Activities

Before watching the film: What do you know about community housing or subsidized housing? What is a community revitalization project?

Why do you think the film is called *Unarmed Verses*? What themes in the film does this title allude to?

How would you describe Francine? How does she perceive herself? Use evidence from the film to support your answer.

What role does family play in Francine's life?

Francine mentions her relationship with her mother at several points throughout the documentary. She says, "I haven't had the chance to build my relationship with my mom that much. I definitely want to know more about her." How does Francine try to bridge the distance that she feels between herself and her mother?

*Unarmed Verses* shows many scenes of Francine's daily life and the chores she does around the house. What are some of her responsibilities? How do these compare with the responsibilities that you have in your home?

Francine says, "All you need is that one person who believes in you." Do you think this is true? Who is this person in Francine's life and how does this person help her to believe in herself?

In *Unarmed Verses*, the filmmaker shows many scenes of community life in Villaways, the neighbourhood where Francine lives. How would you describe this community? Use examples from the film to support your answer. What, in your opinion, are the features of a strong community?

How is Francine's identity shaped by her community? What aspects of your own identity have been influenced by your community?

What is the Villaways revitalization project? How do Francine and the characters featured in the film feel about the revitalization of their neighbourhood? How do you think the revitalization project will affect the Villaways community?

Describe Francine's artistic process with Art Starts from writing her lyrics to recording her music. What are some of the challenges that Francine faces throughout this process? How does she overcome these challenges?

Francine receives mentorship and support from several individuals in her life. Describe the ways in which the following people influence Francine's personal and artistic development: her father, her grandmother, Carleen, Krystle and Lavane.

How do the youth from Villaways, and in particular Francine, find their voice through poetry and music? What do you think it is about these specific art forms, or art in general, that allows for this type of self-expression?

## QUOTATIONS FROM THE FILM TO EXPLORE

1. *"Poetry to me is an unofficial language that speaks to your soul, like a river to your heart. It feels like looking into the eye of a waterfall. I want to create that waterfall."* Francine Valentine
2. *"People look at this community as dirty and worn down. They keep on telling us that they're revitalizing it for us. It's not really for us. It's sad to see it all go away."* Francine Valentine
3. *"It's kind of hard to find your voice around here because there are so many different perspectives and you don't know if yours is good enough."* Francine Valentine
4. *"My grandmother stresses about paying her bills just for this little unit that we live in. They're building condos and we can't afford to even rent a condo. I don't think we can afford to come back."* Francine Valentine
5. *"Poetry is completely for you. But, when you show someone who appreciates your work, it just makes you feel better and it helps validate your feelings."* Lavane Kelly
6. *"To be honest, I cannot tell you why you exist. Only you can fill that blank. But I can tell you, make a choice—make a conscious one—to live not in the darkness but bask in the sun. It's a miracle that we exist at all."* Lavane Kelly
7. *"Carleen is an amazing person. My grandmother even called her my big sister. All you need is that one person to believe in you."* Francine Valentine
8. *"You have to keep working at it at all times if it's your passion... it has to be your life, your focus."* Krystle
9. *"Art is just a way of expression—almost like an escape from reality."* Francine Valentine
10. *"If you don't do something, you can't fail at it."* Francine Valentine
11. *"Project yourself. If you really want to make everybody hear this important thing you have to say, then don't try to speed through it and don't say it so soft."* Lavane Kelly
12. *"Living with people in the same place, it's your job to make it as safe as you can, protect each other. That's what a community is—how they feel for each other."* Francine Valentine
13. *"On the streets it's not what you have. It's what you make of what you've got and that's that."* Francine Valentine
14. *"You're not the only person in the world who's scared of something or who's afraid of failure. So this time, no looking down, okay? Keep your head up."* Krystle Chance
15. *"We all have a voice, we just have to find different ways to use it.... Light shining, light moving, no darkness, heart beating. Do you let the light shine?"* Francine Valentine

## CULMINATING ACTIVITY: FINDING YOUR VOICE

"Poetry to me is an unofficial language that speaks to your soul, like a river to your heart. It feels like looking into the eye of a waterfall. I want to create that waterfall." Francine Valentine

*Unarmed Verses* depicts the power of spoken word poetry and music to empower youth and allow them to express themselves and the issues that are important to them. Over the course of the film, Francine learns to trust in her voice and "let her light shine" through poetry and music. Through this activity, you will have the opportunity to find and express your unique poetic voice.

Begin by watching the TED talk entitled, "If I Should Have a Daughter...." by spoken word poet and founder of Project Voice, Sarah Kay (<http://www.ted.com/> Type the title of the talk into the search function of the website).

Following Sarah Kay's prompt from her TED talk, start your writing process by simply writing down 10 things you know to be true. In a small group, share your list with your peers. Note the things on your list that you have in common and the things that set you apart.

Use something from your list, or something you discovered from sharing your list, as the inspiration for your spoken word poem. Remember that this poem is meant to be performed and carried by your unique voice. Use the tips below to guide your creative process:

- Have a clear subject or theme
- Support your theme with related ideas
- Go with the flow—let your natural train of thought guide your writing
- Don't be afraid to show your attitude and feelings about the subject
- Enhance your poetry with these poetic devices: repetition, rhyming, alliteration, similes, metaphors
- Use your voice—be clear and use intonation to express your ideas
- Rhythm is important—pace your poem, include pauses, speed up or slow down
- Perform—engage the audience with your presence and confidence, make eye contact occasionally, believe in your work

You will perform your spoken word poem at your class' Poetry Slam, a chance for everyone's voice to be heard, validated and empowered.

Finally, submit a one-page written reflection about your process of writing, rehearsing and performing your spoken word poem. In your reflection, include aspects of your peers' performances that spoke to you during the Poetry Slam.

# ACTIVITY RUBRIC: FINDING YOUR VOICE

## Knowledge/Understanding

	2.5 2.9	3.0 3.4	3.5 3.9	4.0 5.0	
Clarity of theme and supporting ideas	Student's presentation is unfocused and lacks a clear theme; supporting ideas are missing or unclear	Student's presentation has a vague theme and the focus is unclear; supporting ideas are not relevant	Student's presentation is focused and has a theme; supporting ideas are mostly relevant	Student's presentation has a clear focus and theme; supporting ideas are relevant and raise critical questions for the audience	/5

## Thinking/Inquiry

	2.5 2.9	3.0 3.4	3.5 3.9	4.0 5.0	
Poetic devices (repetition, rhyming, alliteration, similes, metaphors)	Student does not include any poetic devices	Student includes one poetic device	Student includes two poetic devices	Student includes three or more poetic devices	/5

## Application

	2.5 2.9	3.0 3.4	3.5 3.9	4.0 5.0	
Voice (pitch, pacing, intonation, clarity)	Student demonstrates a limited use of pitch, pacing and intonation; student's voice is too quiet to be heard	Student demonstrates a moderate use of pitch, pacing and intonation; student's voice is sometimes clear and audible	Student demonstrates a good use of pitch, pacing and intonation; student's voice is mostly clear and audible	Student demonstrates an excellent use of pitch, pacing and intonation; student's voice is loud and clear	/5
Delivery (eye contact, audible, enthusiasm)	The student did not engage the audience	The student engaged the audience for some of the time	The audience was engaged for most of the time	The audience was engaged throughout the presentation	/5

## Written Reflection

	2.5 2.9	3.0 3.4	3.5 3.9	4.0 5.0	
Content and organization	Student's reflection lacks organization and description; student's observations are irrelevant or missing	Student's reflection is moderately well organized and includes some descriptions; student makes general observations	Student's reflection is mostly thoughtful, well organized and descriptive; student makes relevant observations	Student reflection is thoughtful, well organized and descriptive throughout; student makes insightful observations	/5

Comments:

Total: \_\_\_ /25

## EXAMPLES OF CURRICULUM EXPECTATIONS

COURSE	OVERALL EXPECTATIONS
Grade 7 & 8 Languages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• identify some media forms and explain how the conventions and techniques associated with them are used to create meaning.</li> <li>• identify various elements of style, including foreshadowing, metaphor, and symbolism, and explain how they help communicate meaning and enhance the effectiveness of texts.</li> <li>• analyze oral texts in order to evaluate how effectively they communicate ideas, opinions, themes or experiences.</li> <li>• explain the connection between a speaker’s tone and the point of view or perspective presented in oral texts.</li> <li>• generate, gather and organize ideas and information to write for an intended purpose and audience.</li> <li>• establish a distinctive voice in their writing appropriate to the subject and audience.</li> <li>• communicate orally in a clear, coherent manner, using a structure and style appropriate to both the topic and the intended audience.</li> </ul>
Grade 7 & 8 Geography	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• describe various ways in which people have responded to challenges and opportunities presented by the physical environment.</li> <li>• assess the effectiveness of various programs and policies aimed at improving the quality of life in various countries/regions.</li> </ul>
Grade 9–12 English	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• identify some media forms and explain how the conventions and techniques associated with them are used to create meaning.</li> <li>• develop and explain interpretations of both simple and complex oral texts, using evidence from the text and the oral and visual cues used in it to support their interpretations.</li> <li>• identify the perspectives and/or biases evident in both simple and complex oral texts and comment on any questions they may raise about beliefs, values and identity.</li> <li>• generate, gather and organize ideas and information to write for an intended purpose and audience.</li> <li>• communicate orally for different purposes, using language suitable for the intended audience.</li> <li>• establish a distinctive voice in their writing, modifying language and tone skillfully to suit the form, audience, and purpose.</li> </ul>
Grade 9 Geography	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• analyze impacts of urban growth in Canada.</li> <li>• analyze characteristics of land use in various Canadian communities, and explain how some factors influence land-use patterns.</li> </ul>
Grade 10 Civics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• assess ways in which people express their perspectives on issues of civic importance.</li> <li>• analyze ways in which various perspectives, beliefs and values are recognized and represented in communities in Canada.</li> </ul>
Grade 10–12 Media Arts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• demonstrate an understanding of the critical analysis process by using it to monitor the creative process, and by examining, interpreting, assessing and reflecting on media art works.</li> <li>• demonstrate an understanding of how media art works reflect personal and cultural identity, and affect personal, cultural and community values and their awareness of those values.</li> <li>• demonstrate an understanding of the sociocultural and historical contexts of media arts.</li> </ul>
Grade 9–12 Music	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• identify and describe ways in which music reflects the society in which it was created and how it has affected communities or cultures.</li> <li>• listen to selections that represent a variety of musical styles and genres, and identify and reflect on their personal responses to them.</li> </ul>

Grade 11 & 12 Equity Studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• explore topics related to equity and social justice, and formulate questions to guide their research.</li> <li>• demonstrate an understanding of a range of perspectives on and approaches to equity and social justice issues, and of factors that affect inequity and social injustice.</li> <li>• analyze, in historical and contemporary contexts, the dynamics of power relations and privilege as well as various factors that contribute to power or marginalization.</li> <li>• explain how various aspects of identity may be socially constructed and internalized.</li> <li>• demonstrate an understanding of how the use of language can empower or marginalize individuals and groups.</li> </ul>
Grade 11 Dynamics of Human Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• demonstrate an understanding of the components of personal well-being, how to achieve and maintain it, and its importance throughout the life course.</li> <li>• explain how self-concept and self-esteem influence personal well-being.</li> <li>• demonstrate an understanding of how self-concept influences an individual's interactions with others.</li> <li>• identify the roles people have in various relationships.</li> <li>• describe strategies for sustaining various types of relationships as they evolve over time.</li> <li>• outline various ways in which individuals can enhance relationships through community involvement.</li> </ul>
Grade 12 Human Development Throughout the Lifespan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• explain protective factors at the individual, familial and community levels.</li> <li>• explain the process of identity formation throughout the lifespan.</li> <li>• analyze the relationship between personality and social interactions.</li> <li>• analyze the role that family plays in socializing its members.</li> <li>• assess the impact of marginalization.</li> </ul>
Grade 12 Analyzing Current Economic Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• use the economic inquiry process and the concepts of economic thinking when investigating current Canadian and international economic issues.</li> <li>• analyze how economic and political ideas and various sociocultural factors affect economic decision making.</li> </ul>

The Overall Expectations listed above are from the *Ontario Curriculum*. Complete course descriptions, including all Overall and Specific Expectations can be found at: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/teachers/curriculum.html>