

1619 Project Scholars are Nerds

All of the voices you encounter in the *1619 Project* nerd out about something. They read prolifically, explore prolifically, and nerd out about all kinds of things, but especially about their own area of expertise.

In this mini-unit, you will start becoming a social justice nerd.

Step one, choose a *1619 Project* mentor. Explore the images, the essays, the topics, the fiction and poetry writers. You can choose your mentor for any reason, but there should be a distinct reason why you chose your mentor.

My 1619 Mentor

Bryan Stevenson

My rationale (reason) for choosing my *1619* Mentor

I know a little bit about him and his work for the release of wrongly convicted people, and now I want to learn more.

You can work in any direction:

- Starting with their contributions to *The 1619 Project*
- Starting with their other body of work
- Starting with their story—who they are

Nevertheless, you will be making connections between all three.

What is significant and important about their contributions to the 1619 Project?

Started the Equal Justice Initiative which has worked with youth as young as thirteen who were convicted of life sentences.
The US has 4% of the world's population, but it has 20% of its prisoners.
In the early 1970s, we only had 350,000 people incarcerated; today it is 2.3 million with 4.5 million more on probation or parole.
In 1980, 40,000 were incarcerated for drug offenses—450,000 today.
200,000 currently condemned to life sentences or virtual life sentences.
Disproportionately affects Black people.
In Georgia, a study showed that people convicted of killing a white person were 22 times more likely to be sentenced to death than someone who killed a black person.
Won a case (Sullivan v Florida and Graham v Florida) that the Supreme Court ruled that life sentences for children for non-homicide offenses is unconstitutional.

In Louisiana, 89% of prisoners serving life sentences for non-homicide cases were Black.

Angola prison is on a former plantation, and prisoners are forced to work on field crops including cotton with gun-toting guards on horseback.

Because of the three-strikes laws, people have been sentenced to life without parole for stealing a bicycle or possessing marijuana.

Beyond the sheer brutality—cutting off limbs, castrating, burning, cutting out tongues, and on and on—the institution of enslaving human beings cemented the ideological belief that Black people are not human beings.

Post-slavery there was convict leasing—where Blacks were convicted of petty or invented offenses and then leased to businesses and farms—death rates in these prison camps were close to 45%.

All of these added to a sense of Blacks being presumptively criminal.

Our political system is littered with overt racists and white supremacists. One such is James Eastland who fought desegregation of schools and all civil rights legislation from his position as US Senator where he served up until 1978.

P. 280-281 is a small list of the many lynchings, showing that a simple act of standing up for oneself was caused enough alone to be tortured and killed.

Slavery, Black Codes, lynching, and the current prison complex are all intertwined. EJI Museum in Montgomery, Alabama.

If we don't come to terms with slavery, we will never overcome racially biased justice and punitive systems of control.

What is significant and important about their other body of work?

He has fought for the freedom of unfairly and incorrectly sentenced people. One of the most important decisions is one that Supreme Court ruled on that forbids a life sentence with no hope of parole for people 17 and under.

EJI also works on anti-poverty, education, and racial justice initiatives.

He helped create the Legacy Museum which provides a comprehensive history of the legacy of slavery.

He also created the National Museum for Peace and Justice, a sober and meaningful place to reflect on racial injustice.

What is significant and important about their life story and experiences?

He grew up in a poor rural community in Delaware and became aware of the haves and have-nots. He still didn't know what he wanted to practice as a lawyer until he went to Georgia to work with the Southern Prisoner Defense Fund.

He believes that the worst thing we have done shouldn't define our entire life.

Vocal Justice Scholars (intellectual nerds) research like wormholes. We follow a path that leads to another path that leads to another path, and on and on. (For example, when we researched Nikole Hannah-Jones, we learned that the University of North Carolina wouldn't give her tenure, so she headed to Howard University; as a result, we went and learned that Howard University is a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) that is famous for producing some of the greatest minds in the United States including our current Vice President Kamala Harris.

Follow a wormhole (or more than one) and record your new learnings.

Bryan Stevenson started Equal Justice Initiative and then created museums discussing the legacies of slavery and racism. The National Memorial for Peace and Justice; it was built with help from the MASS Design Group. Their mission is to research, build, and advocate for architecture that promotes justice and human dignity. One of their projects that is really exciting to me is Justice is Beauty which is organized around themes of engaging, healing, fostering, and conserving. The more I explore MASS, the more I would be excited to work with or for such an organization.

Putting it all Together

Why did Nikole Hannah-Jones want your mentor to be a part of the *1619 Project*?

Incarceration has been used as a tool to perpetuate profits for the wealthy through the exploitation of communities of color; moreover, it is a tool to perpetuate white supremacy. Finally, Stevenson makes a clear connection between slavery and contemporary incarceration, so if we don't have any accountability or reconciliation for our past atrocities, we won't fix the contemporary.

How does your understanding of your mentor's other experiences and body of work add to your understanding of their contributions to the *1619 Project*?

I think Stevenson is somehow who highlights the importance of *The 1619 Project*. He never set off with the intent to fight for the freedom of wrongly convicted people or fight for giving children a second chance, but once he started to discover the realities of our prison system—a life sentence with no parole for stealing a bike—he felt compelled to do this work. Hopefully, after people read *The 1619 Project*, others will be moved to action.

What have you learned from your mentor that you can apply to your work as a Vocal Justice scholar?

With so many issues needing to be addressed, I don't need to take them all on. I can focus my efforts on a singular front and that will actually make ripples elsewhere.

Choose One or More Questions

What are you curious to learn more about? What questions do you have for your mentor? What do you want others to know about or learn from your mentor?

I want people to really absorb one of his really important quotes: "Each of us is more than the worst thing we have done."

I want to know how he best thinks we can make systemic change, so his work becomes obsolete.

I'm curious what he thinks everyday people can do to fight for a more just prison system.

We strongly encourage you to reach out to your mentor. Let them know what you learned from them. Let you know how they may have changed your perspective or reinforced it. Let them know how their body of work, contributions to *The 1619 Project*, or their lived experiences have impacted you. Let them know how you intend to use your new knowledge. Ask them questions. Invite them to visit our class.