

Cindy Weisbart

RICPA 3rd Annual Juried Members' Spotlight Exhibition 2022

Project Statement

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I am a history teacher at Cambridge Rindge & Latin School, an urban public high school near Boston. My colleague and friend, Nkrumah Jones, leaves our school every day to coach the Bunker Hill Community College Bulldogs, a nationally ranked NJCAA (Junior College) men's basketball team in nearby Charlestown, MA.

Jones invited me many times to see his team. I regularly declined the invitation, uninterested in men's college basketball. When I went to a practice in October of 2018, I immediately understood his persistence.

Jones creates a safe, enclosed and protected space for young men of color to be 100% themselves: they grow and learn, they are vulnerable, happy, playful, angry, frustrated, exuberant. The environment he creates is like no other; humor, outrageous passion, political awareness, and maturity guide the players and their mentor. I photographed home and away games and practices, on the court and in the locker rooms, for the rest of the season. Each night brought extraordinary moments of change, visible in expression and movement..

"You need to play like you are community college students who are going to have to fight for everything you get in life, like nothing is going to be handed on a silver platter!" Jones growled in a huddle. Heated and pacing on the sideline, "it's time for a conversation!" Reminding himself that one vulnerable young man "doesn't deal well with conversations," he strategizes how to be both fierce and encouraging. A player arrives, anxious about being late, after being pulled over by police. "You were profiled," he says gently, opening a space for two Black men to connect over a common, threatening experience: you're not alone; it isn't your fault; the requirements of 'being on time' must be flexible in a world of structural inequality.

Jones supports students with resources for housing, immigration, health, food, tutoring, recruitment for four-year college programs, and scholarships. He coaches the whole person. His players go on to notable academic and professional achievements.

In registering emotions and expressions on the Bunker Hill basketball court, I distill layers of guidance and community that manifest joy. This family of men were teachers of this teacher.