

GREAT IMMIGRANTS ★ GREAT AMERICANS

FEATURING JEAN-CLAUDE BRIZARD

MY FIRST FLIGHT WAS IN 1976 WHEN I WAS TWELVE YEARS OLD, AND IT TOOK ME FROM HAITI TO NEW YORK.

I COULDN'T WAIT TO FINALLY BE REUNITED WITH MY PARENTS, WHO'D FLED THE DICTATORSHIP FOUR YEARS EARLIER.



BUT GOING OUT THE AUTOMATIC DOORS AT JFK, THE COLD AND THE NOISE HIT ME SO HARD THAT I RAN BACK INSIDE.

CONCEPT AND SCRIPT BY JONGSMA + O'NEILL
ILLUSTRATED BY CHUAN MING ONG

I WALKED INTO THIS PLACE AND EVERYONE LOOKED LIKE ME – BLACK AND BROWN KIDS. THE FIRST DAY OF CLASS, MY STUDENTS SURROUNDED ME.

YOU MAY GET ME, BUT I'M GOING TO GET AT LEAST ONE OF YOU. WHO'S IT GOING TO BE?!



IT WAS A TEST TO SEE IF I WAS SCARED OF THEM. AFTER THAT, I KNEW WHO I WAS TEACHING, AND THEY WERE MUCH NICER TO ME.

ABOUT A DECADE LATER, I NEEDED A JOB AND NEW YORK CITY WAS DESPERATE FOR TEACHERS. I WAS SENT TO RIKERS ISLAND TO TEACH PRISONERS.*

THE ONE KID WHO DIDN'T STAND UP THAT FIRST DAY TURNED OUT TO BE BRILLIANT.

BUT IT WASN'T A PLACE I WANTED TO BE. I WORE A TIE EVERY DAY AND GREW A BEARD BECAUSE I WAS AFRAID I WAS GOING TO BE CONFUSED WITH THE INMATES AT RIKERS.

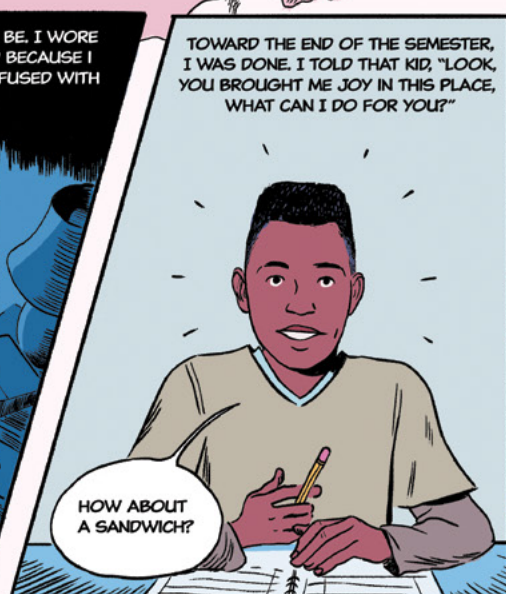
TOWARD THE END OF THE SEMESTER, I WAS DONE. I TOLD THAT KID, "LOOK, YOU BROUGHT ME JOY IN THIS PLACE, WHAT CAN I DO FOR YOU?"



WHAT DO YOU CALL THIS AGAIN?

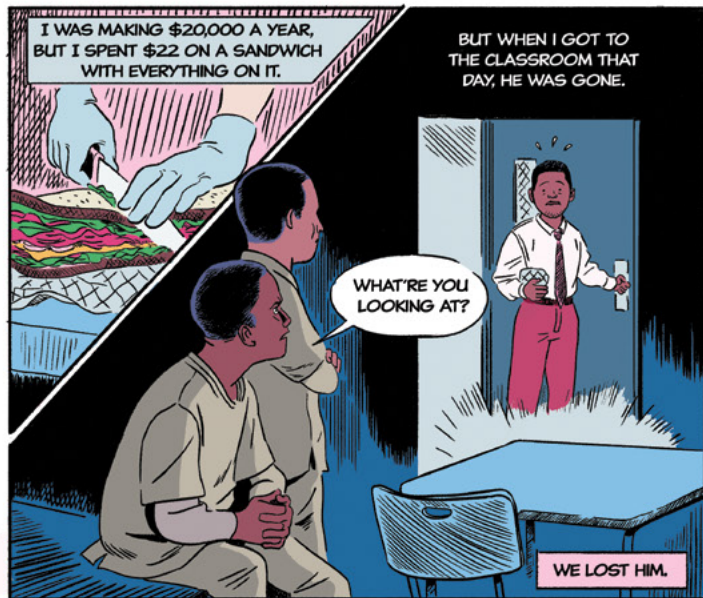
ALGEBRA.

ALGEBRA'S EASY.



HOW ABOUT A SANDWICH?

*IN THE U.S., 9.6% OF WORKERS IN K-12 AND 17.4% OF WORKERS IN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES ARE FOREIGN-BORN. SOURCE: IMMIGRANTS AND THE U.S. EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM, AMERICAN IMMIGRATION COUNCIL, AUGUST 2021



I WAS MAKING \$20,000 A YEAR, BUT I SPENT \$22 ON A SANDWICH WITH EVERYTHING ON IT.

BUT WHEN I GOT TO THE CLASSROOM THAT DAY, HE WAS GONE.

WHAT'RE YOU LOOKING AT?

WE LOST HIM.



THE U.S. MARSHALS TOOK HIM TO A MAXIMUM SECURITY FACILITY UPSTATE. THAT'S ALL I KNOW, AND ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW.

ONCE A KID'S IN PRISON, THERE'S ONLY SO MUCH YOU CAN DO. MY FOCUS SHIFTED TO THE FRONT END OF THE CHALLENGE. HOW COULD WE RESHAPE EDUCATION TO STOP THE FLOW OF KIDS INTO PLACES LIKE RIKERS?

ABOUT 20 YEARS AGO, TO CONQUER MY FEAR OF HEIGHTS, I GOT MY PILOT'S LICENSE. I WAS HOOKED IMMEDIATELY.



AS A TEACHER IN THE CLASSROOM, I COULD IMPACT 30-35 KIDS. WHEN I BECAME A PRINCIPAL IN BROOKLYN, MAYBE 2,000.

IN CHICAGO, AS CEO OF THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS, I COULD TOUCH 400,000 LIVES.

WHEN YOU'RE LOOKING DOWN FROM THERE, YOU DON'T GET CAUGHT UP IN THE MUCK.



YOU SEE THE WHOLE SYSTEM OF NATURE, AND OUR IMPACT ON IT.

THE SAME IS TRUE WITH EDUCATION.

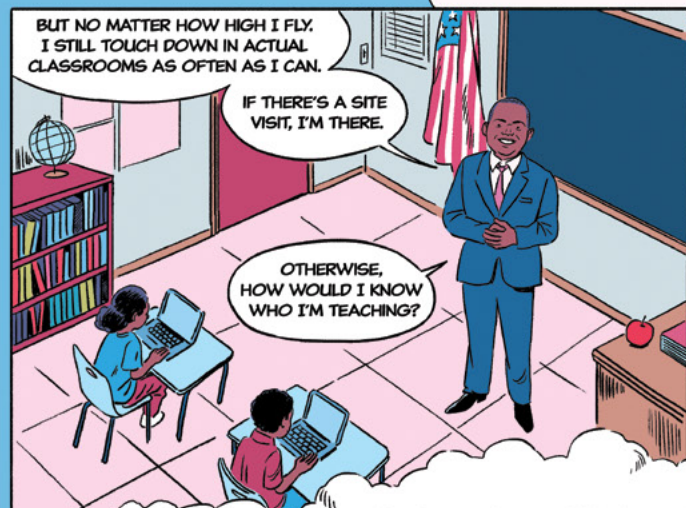


IT'S LIKE ARCHIMEDES SAID: GIVE ME A LEVER LONG ENOUGH AND A FULCRUM ON WHICH TO PLACE IT, AND I SHALL MOVE THE WORLD.

NOW, IN MY CURRENT ROLE, I WORK ON EVERYTHING FROM GETTING K-12 STUDENTS ACCESS TO HIGH-SPEED INTERNET TO FIGURING OUT HOW TO HARNESS AI TO IMPROVE LEARNING.



THIS IS GLOBAL STUFF.



FOR FOUR DECADES, JEAN-CLAUDE BRIZARD HAS DEDICATED HIS LIFE TO EDUCATION. HE CURRENTLY SERVES AS PRESIDENT AND CEO OF DIGITAL PROMISE, A NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION WORKING TO USE RESEARCH, PRACTICE, AND TECHNOLOGY TO TRANSFORM LEARNING FOR ALL LEARNERS.

READ MORE GREAT IMMIGRANT STORIES AT CARNEGIE.ORG/IMMIGRANTSTORIES.