

America to me

CAST DESCRIPTIONS

The Students

Brendan Barrette (sophomore on the College Prep and Honors track) is an aspiring baseball pitcher with serious potential to get a college scholarship – maybe even go professional. Despite his parents being teachers, Brendan struggles to apply himself academically. He has an acute awareness of class identity. It is a badge of honor that he lives on the south side of Oak Park, where the homes are more modest and the families less affluent, rather than in other parts of the community.

Diane Barrios-Smith (junior on the College Prep track) has battled depression which she believes stems from a misguided desire for outside validation. Diane has two moms – one white and one Mexican, who are now estranged. Most people assume Diane is white, but she feels more connected to her Mexican identity. She has strong opinions and cares deeply about social justice, which can sometimes lead to debates with classmates.

Jada Buford (senior on the College Prep and Honors track) is an activist. Over the course of the year, we witness Jada as she begins making video essays about race to launch conversations. Her films tackle issues such as the use of the “N” word, micro-aggressions she experiences, and the myth of “reverse racism”. She is aware that her academic performance always doesn’t match her engaged passion for change – but wonders how much of that has to do with the inequities she sees in the system.

Charles Donalson (junior on the College Prep and Honors track) is an aspiring writer. He is both a big personality and a bit of a loner. The only child of a single mother who has a Master’s degree and works in IT, Charles sometimes struggles academically. During this year, Charles’ poetry becomes deeper and more conscious as he emerges as a leading voice on OPRF’s perennially strong Spoken Word Team.

Caroline Robling-Griest (freshman on the Honors track) is an academic high-flyer driven by elevated and often stressful expectations. Determined to match her older sister’s prodigious accomplishments, she joins numerous clubs and is fiercely competitive about winning academic awards. When her father was unemployed for several years, the family’s financial uncertainty made Caroline even more determined. Her yoga instructor mother grapples with the unintended ways she adds to Caroline’s academic pressure while trying to help her reach her goals.

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Ke'Shawn Kumsa (junior on the College Prep track) is bright, but isn't engaged at school. His mom moved the family to Oak Park for the school, even though in the mid-1990s when she attended the school she was labeled a behavior problem and eventually expelled. Ke'Shawn's sister, Iyana, is due to graduate at the end of the year — the first of her family to complete high school.

Grant Lee (freshman on the College Prep and Honors track) takes everything he does seriously: academics, his biracial identity, acting — even dating for the first time goes better with a little push from his less anxious best friend. Grant's parents are loving and protective. His African-American father worries about the potential dangers for Grant as a young black boy. His white mother tries to stay connected to her son as he grows into a young adult.

Kendale McCoy (senior on the College Prep and Honors Track) lives with his great aunt and uncle, who have raised him since he was a baby. They are doting parents who show up and videotape all of his band and wrestling performances. As a section leader for the marching band, he has many white friends, but this year he draws closer to his wrestling teammates, who are mostly black and Latino. Kendale aspires to finally become a starter on the school's defending state champion wrestling team.

Terrence Moore (junior on the Special Ed track) is on a five-year plan to graduate high school. Extremely quiet and soft-spoken, Terrence can disappear in classes, counting the minutes until he gets home to play video games with his younger brother, who also is his best friend. His strongest advocate is his mother, Telicia, who believes that Terrence is more capable than some of his teachers give him credit for. She fights to get a paraprofessional aide for Terrence at the school.

Tiara Oliphant (sophomore on the College Prep track) lives with her sister Telicia and nephew Terrence in a small apartment close to the Chicago dividing line. Tiara is a smart but indifferent student who struggles to apply herself and is at serious risk of failing chemistry. She is more passionate about being a cheerleader, providing the film a window into the almost entirely African-American squad.

Chanti Relf (junior on the Honors and AP Track) is extremely quiet, empathetic, and an immensely talented poet. The child of an Asian-American mother and African-American father, each parent aspires to help Chanti navigate the stresses of being a high-performing biracial student in different ways. Junior year is marked by stress — academic and social. Chanti's desire to express a non-binary identity is fraught with the accompanying fear of not being treated fairly or being understood by others.

Gabriel Townsell (senior on the Honors and AP Track) is an All-State and national champion wrestler, as well as, captain of the OPRF wrestling team. An "A" student, he earned a scholarship to Stanford. While his ambitious mother and father are happy he came to OPRF, they are less than impressed by the school's treatment of black students — even achievers like their son. When Gabe first

enrolled, the school's residence officers investigated whether Gabe really lived in Oak Park.

The Teachers and Administrators

Jessica Stovall is a popular English teacher in her ninth year at OPRF who finds herself at a personal and professional crossroads. Her commitment to Ke'Shawn and her other students' education is obvious, as are her frustrations with the administration's lack of success in combating achievement disparities. As a biracial woman herself, Jessica candidly shares her challenging journey as a woman of color, both in childhood and as a teacher at OPRF.

Aaron Podolner, physics teacher, was raised in Oak Park by white, liberal, activist parents. He feels that a big part of his mission as a teacher is to help black kids overcome disparities. He likes to joke irreverently with black kids about race, which lands well with some students, like Charles, but does not work for Jada. When he shares a "racial memoir" he has written, Jada delivers a stinging rebuke. Well-meaning but stubborn, Podolner is the prime impetus for Jada to make her "Dear OPRF" series on race and white privilege.

Paul Collins, the wrestling coach and reading teacher, is a former student athlete at OPRF. By his own admission a low academic achiever, his experiences inform the kind teacher he has become. He has led OPRF's mostly black and Latino wrestling team to national success, but the team's run of state championships has been met with overt racism in the white-dominated high-school wrestling community. Collins teaching in the school's impressive reading program helps kids with skills well below grade level. The relationship between Collins and Kendale is among the most memorable of the series.

Lindy Novotny, art teacher and leadership class teacher, goes above and beyond in her work with Terrence in both metalworking and graphic design classes. Her patient engagement with the shy student draws him out, helping him fulfill his artistic potential. Novotny becomes an outspoken critic of the school's leadership in the aftermath of a controversial basketball game.

Pete Kahn, the school's Spoken Word coach, began OPRF's program 10 years ago. Since then, it has grown into one of the most impressive in the state. OPRF regularly competes for the state "Louder Than a Bomb" title, though it has never taken first place. Some speculate that this is because of its reputation as an affluent suburban school. Charles views Kahn as a father figure and the team as his true home at OPRF.

Tyrone Williams, a history teacher, is the only African-American teaching the AP curriculum at OPRF. Raised in Jamaica by a divorced mother who instilled high academic expectations in him, he has a captivating classroom persona and regularly challenges students' thinking. Jada loves and admires him, and he says that she is among the most courageous students he has ever taught. But his relationship with Diane is rockier, as he tries to get her to understand cultural issues around their differences of race, age and position.

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Dr. Jackie Moore, the most outspoken member of the school board, ran on a platform to prioritize racial equity issues in the school. During the course of the year, she befriends Jessica Stovall, supporting her efforts to overcome administration resistance. A community controversy over the building of a new \$40 million pool bogs down the school board, throwing the lack of urgency about educational disparities into sharp relief — something Moore addresses pointedly during board meetings.

Nathaniel Rouse, OPRF's principal, and **Steven Isoye**, the school district superintendent, opposed filming and steadfastly refused to be interviewed during the course of the school year. They are captured in school-board meetings, parent meetings and public events. Despite limited access, the film takes account of the ways in which they address — and don't address — issues of educational equity. A biennial survey by the Illinois Board of Education rated the principal and administration near or at the bottom of public schools in Illinois. How is it possible, the film asks, that such a highly funded and regarded high school can have such ineffective administration?