



Kids For Cash is a documentary about President Judge Mark Ciavarella and Senior Judge Michael Conahan, judges who used their power to send children away in exchange for big bucks.

Let me first start off by saying, in no way what I'm about to say about the film and its victims is by any way meant to divert your attention from the truth about what Ciavarella or Conahan did, but the documentary opens doors to discussions that go just beyond the supplied material.

Now during the two infamous judges runs they put away thousands of kids for minor offenses, or at least that's what the victims lead you to believe. There is never any hard evidence such as documents or archive news footage to actually show us what happened. Were expected to go on the word of the children and their tearful parents.

One child is put into the juvenile detention center for creating a Myspace account fictionalizing her schools Vice Principle. Another is sent away for purchasing a scooter which turned out to be stolen. Yet another is sent away for drinking while a minor and, from what I understand, was a joke by the boys father, planting drug paraphernalia in his vehicle and being pulled over by cops the Dad knew. Huge faux faux by the Dad as it resulted in the son being locked up in juvie.

As the documentary roles on we see several parents breaking down in tears, the children whose lives had been snatched away by a harsh judge either coping with their lives or stuck on playing the victim, some even going one step further and justifying their poor life choices on the trauma of being locked up as a juvenile. At this point I think the documentaries spell was broken on me.

It's obvious the judges were crooked. It reminded me of Dog The Bounty Hunter. Dog would always tell his captors, while offering them a smoke or help later on down the line, that they should have turned themselves in and faced the consequences, something Dog and his family did not do when they were held in Mexico on charges, instead choosing to flee across the border and hiding out.

Ciavarella would go to schools before hand and tell the students that he has a no tolerance policy for violence and other school crimes and that if any of the kids broke this policy he would gladly send them up river. While in court he would ask the kids if they attended his speech at their school, of which he gave several times to almost all the schools in his district. If the kids answered yes that would be it. Shackles and at minimum 90 days incarcerated, at worst half a decade. Like he said in his speech, "No one can control what happens to you or I but ourselves".

By the end of the documentary, as Ciavarella pleaded to reporters and the people about his innocence, I couldn't help but feel no sympathy or see the man in anything less then a biased light. He wanted the kids to be held accountable, he should have held himself accountable, especially since he admitted to doing some unethical and immoral things. The only difference was that he was lawyered up, a right he often persuaded the kids and their parents they did not need before sending them away. As far as I was concerned, he was guilty of a lot, even if it was never really proven that he was sending kids up river for profit (in a court of law anyway).

Going back to the victims I also couldn't help but not feel to sorry for them. A cook at "Tony's", a restaurant featured in the documentary said, "We all got into school yard fights as kids. No one ever sent us away because of it". True, but the vague way in which the kids are presented as victims in the documentary leaves a lot of room for doubt. Not that they deserved the punishment they were handed out, but that they were these innocent kids.

Most of the parents talked about the hardships they faced. Speech impediments, learning disabilities, dysfunction in the family unit. I only shook my head at this. One kid was being given beer form his father, another, after being released, stole a credit card. One of them says while inside he learned all kinds of bad things, but this kid goes on to be normal and stay out of trouble. Even shooting for a higher education instead of allowing themselves to be victimized by celebrity pity and simply falling into a self made rut thanks to being enabled by their parents or society.

I think the film tries really hard to express the fact that our country, along with only two others, doesn't quite respect the rights of our nations children. It paints this picture that the country and the



government should do more to assure that children are given all of the tools and direction they need to live happy full lives before entering the workforce and adulthood where they are bound by rules that dictate they look after themselves.

After watching the sob stories unfold, some of them seemingly overdone, I couldn't help but feel like the real message should have been that not the country, not the government, but parents should be held accountable for the way their children are raised. I understand that as adults we are forced to abandon our children to the school systems while we work to support them, but there is ample enough time in the day to teach them, to nourish them with good decision making and make them feel loved and confident enough to face the world without fear. Instead we see kids whose parents allow them to drink, enable them by telling them they did nothing, even if they were causing fights in school. Don't send them up river because of it, but don't tell them they did nothing wrong.

I think in the end the documentary suffers from a lot of gray area's. Sensationalizing the victims and their parents instead of offering up facts and pretty much demonizing the judges, who were obviously guilty of something, seemed like a waste. All that resulted in this direction was making the kids seem overprotected and preaching to the choir about the villains.

Fortunately the film does have a website that elaborates a bit more on the kids and their cases, but after watching the documentary I'm not overly compelled to head to the website.

Lastly, as an inner city kid, this is nothing new to me. Kids have been being sent up river for a long time, sometimes for the smallest of infractions being pieced together to paint a mural of chaos. Some of the kids in trouble eventually choose to straighten their own lives out, something I'll give Ciavarella, "No one in your life but you can decide what happens to you", while others allow themselves to be herded into a false sense of belonging with trouble or see themselves as victims who don't know any better. Again, it's not the government and it's not the country that should be held accountable for lost kids becoming even more lost, it's the responsibility of the parents to set them straight and guide them so that they don't find themselves the victims of anything.

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