

 Life Stories Presents



Teaching *The* ***Thread***

SEASON ONE SUPPLEMENT



“I don’t know why storytelling is such an intrinsic part of the human experience. But if we lose it, I think we essentially lose our humanity.”

**– JASON ALEXANDER,
ACTOR**



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Episode Summary/Topics Discussed

Season One of *The Thread* features 16 episodes, each approximately 30 minutes long and available on our Life Stories [YouTube channel](#) and at [LifeStories.org](#). The full-length interview and transcripts for each of *The Thread* episodes are also available for audiences to access anytime.

Episode Summary/Topics Discussed

This section introduces a selection of the interviews with a brief synopsis and outline of some of the topline topics and themes relevant to Social Studies and ELA classrooms. Many of these ideas are appropriate to both disciplines, and as you watch the episodes, we invite you to add your own ideas and connections to the relevant topics and themes.

Note: All five social and emotional competencies identified by CASEL are woven throughout the series.



Jason Alexander
Actor

THE POWER OF LAUGHTER

Summary: Jason Alexander explores the impact of fame and the powerful connection between celebrities and their audience. He touches on the influence of his parents and acknowledges a deep connection to the culture and values of his Jewish heritage. Alexander discusses the current state of the world, reflects on the importance of hope, and encourages people not to abandon dialogue.

Topics Discussed

- ▣ **Social Studies:** Exploring pluralism and service as a value of civil society.
- ▣ **English Language Arts:** The responsibility of fame, coming-of-age and finding your voice in theater and comedy, the importance of family and heritage, the importance of listening to others' stories.

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Reginald Dwayne Betts

Poet & Prison Reform Advocate

A VOICE FOR THE INCARCERATED

Summary: Reginald Betts recalls spending nine years in prison starting when he was 16. He examines the impact of incarceration on creativity and what led him to become a poet. Betts discusses the harsh realities of the criminal justice system from his perspectives as a felon, and then as a law student at Yale, public defender, and non-profit leader.

Topics Discussed

- ▣ **Social Studies:** Examination of incarceration and democracy, violation of the Eighth Amendment, exploring current Supreme Court cases as they pertain to juvenile incarceration, the harm of youth incarceration, advocacy and the law, and the importance of restorative justice.
- ▣ **English Language Arts:** Exploring identity, what it means to be a parent, coming-of-age as a Black man in America, the importance of community, becoming a writer, finding your voice, the power of poetry, and the need for restorative justice.

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Kurt Alexander
Radio Host

A HIP-HOP ODYSSEY

Summary: Kurt “Big Boy” Alexander recalls growing up in a household filled with love despite financial struggles and highlights the impact of music and hip-hop on his early years. He provides insights into his resilience facing homelessness and the transformative power of pivotal moments in his life, including narrowly avoiding arrest and receiving a radio opportunity that marked the beginning of his successful career.

Topics Discussed

- ❑ **Social Studies:** Coming-of-age as a Black man in America, the early years of hip-hop in America, the cultural significance of *Big Boy’s Neighborhood*.
- ❑ **English Language Arts:** Reflections on his childhood, growing up in poverty, periods of being unhoused, the lasting/lingering effects of childhood trauma, the place of music to cope and an escape, struggling with obesity, discovering poetry and hip-hop, achieving tremendous success as a radio personality.

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Father Greg Boyle
Priest

WELCOMING THE UNWELCOME

Summary: Father Greg Boyle reflects on being raised in Los Angeles and how his Jesuit upbringing and education led him to become a priest. He discusses creating Homeboy Industries and working with previous gang members with a focus on mutual transformation. Father Boyle connects the idea of holiness to health and being rooted in love rather than specific religious beliefs.

Topics Discussed

- ❑ **Social Studies:** Jesuit education and social justice work, the important role of community social welfare and social enterprise organizations, civic leadership, the power of a second chance.
- ❑ **English Language Arts:** Exploring the relationship of faith to justice, courage, healing, love, and belonging, and the belief that everyone is more than the worst thing they have ever done.

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Roz Chast
Cartoonist

DRAWING FROM LIFE

Summary: Roz Chast reflects on growing up with overprotective parents as an anxious child with a weird sense of humor. She discusses the influence of cartoonist Charles Addams, the challenges of aging, and the importance of pursuing what you love, and examines how storytelling emerges as a way to make sense of life, connect with others, and express empathy.

Topics Discussed

- ❑ **Social Studies:** This episode’s strengths are most appropriate for ELA classroom
- ❑ **English Language Arts:** Coming-of-age as an only child, finding one’s voice as a cartoonist, discovering other creative outlets for storytelling, being responsible for and taking care of aging parents.

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Katie Couric
Journalist

TRAGEDIES TO TRIUMPHS

Summary: Katie Couric touches on her competitive nature from childhood and explores her experience as a trailblazing woman in journalism as the first female anchor of a network evening newscast. She opens up about the loss of her first husband to colon cancer and the impact of his illness and death on her life perspective.

Topics Discussed

- ❑ **Social Studies:** Trailblazing woman in a male-dominated field, the role of journalism in a democracy, exploring disability rights and health care policy.
- ❑ **English Language Arts:** Coming-of-age story, women in journalism, exploring themes of loss, grief, and healing.

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Gloria Estefan
Singer

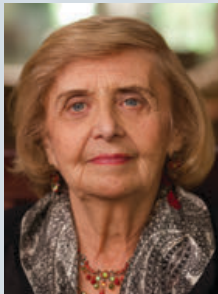
SINGING THROUGH STRUGGLES

Summary: Gloria Estefan reflects on being raised in a Cuban family that faced challenges upon immigrating to the United States and how music was an unexpected emotional outlet from a young age. Estefan discusses how she met her husband, explores their personal and professional dynamics, and highlights the impact of their collaboration.

Topics Discussed

- ❑ **Social Studies:** The Cuban Revolution, the Bay of Pigs, migration, assimilation, her coming-of-age as a Cuban-American, one family's Cold War experience, breaking new boundaries as a Latina woman artist and entrepreneur, and giving back to her community as a civic leader.
- ❑ **English Language Arts:** Discovering voice through music, exploring new identities, following personal passion, achieving tremendous success, overcoming personal challenges and trauma, and working in partnership with her husband as artists and community leaders.

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Tova Friedman
Holocaust Survivor

SURVIVING AUSCHWITZ

Summary: Tova Friedman reflects on being a Holocaust survivor, vividly describing her time in the ghettos, labor camps, and eventually Auschwitz. Friedman shares the challenges her family faced as survivors in postwar America. She emphasizes the importance of storytelling and her commitment to ensuring her children and grandchildren carry on the legacy of remembrance and resilience.

Topics Discussed

- ❑ **Social Studies:** World War II in Germany and Poland, surviving Auschwitz, rebuilding her life postwar, the role and importance of witness testimony and storytelling for history education.
- ❑ **English Language Arts:** Survivor testimony from the Holocaust, experiencing trauma, intergenerational storytelling, building resilience. An important addition to any unit on memoir, the Holocaust, teaching testimony.

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Tony Hawk

Professional
Skateboarder &
Entrepreneur

FINDING YOUR PASSION

Summary: Tony Hawk describes his journey in skateboarding as a mix of passion and determination, talks about overcoming challenges by obsessively honing his skills, and recalls the iconic moment of landing the 900 at the 1999 X Games. Hawk reflects on the entrepreneurial spirit that led him to start Birdhouse Skateboards in 1992, shaping a culture defined by art, lifestyle, and sport.

Topics Discussed

- ▣ **Social Studies:** Looking at the rise of cultural/sports movement, subcultures, entrepreneurship, risk taking, recasting a misunderstood part of American culture.
- ▣ **English Language Arts:** Coming-of-age and feeling like an outcast, seeking community and belonging, internal motivation and determination, commitment to working hard, interrogating the myth of the American Dream.

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Rev. Dr. Jacqueline Lewis

Author & Activist

FINDING WISDOM IN PAIN

Summary: Rev. Dr. Jacqueline Lewis recalls how difficult childhood experiences shaped her commitment to activism. She shares her belief in the interconnectedness of humanity, advocates for conscious voting and learning from diverse perspectives, emphasizes the importance of self-love as a foundation for “fierce-love,” and acknowledges the power of “justice-work” or individuals to make a positive impact to change the world.

Topics Discussed

- ▣ **Social Studies:** Coming-of-age as a Black girl in America, childhood trauma, commitment to activism, the connection between faith and social justice work.
- ▣ **English Language Arts:** Power of faith and prayer, nurturing human development across life stages, exploring “hurt people hurt people,” the hard work of justice work, and the idea of “fierce love.”

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Jason Reynolds

Author

THE POWER OF NARRATIVE

Summary: Jason Reynolds reflects on his upbringing in Oxon Hill, Maryland, and how his parents gave him freedom and encouraged open communication. Reynolds discusses his approach to connecting with young readers and the importance of literacy, emphasizing how it teaches discipline, persistence, and broadens vocabulary.

Topics Discussed

- ▣ **Social Studies:** 1980s/1990s growing up outside of D.C., establishing his moral compass and the circles of obligation, importance of education and teachers and his community, framing literacy as a civil right, current book bans directed at his novels.
- ▣ **English Language Arts:** Coming-of-age as a Black man, childhood influences, powerful relationship with his parents, the positive role of mentors and teachers, discovering his voice as a writer, book banning, literacy as a civil right.

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Cecile Richards
Former President,
Planned
Parenthood

CHAMPIONING CHOICE

Summary: Cecile Richards reflects on her upbringing in a politically active family in Texas. She discusses her journey into activism, her experience in labor organizing, and her time as the head of Planned Parenthood. Richards emphasizes the importance of simplifying communication to connect with people and the need for women’s leadership in politics.

Topics Discussed

- ▣ **Social Studies:** Coming-of-age in a political family, becoming a labor organizer, working for women’s health, examining the Affordable Care Act with the lens of women’s health, an analysis of gender roles in politics and electoral politics, political leadership.
- ▣ **English Language Arts:** Activism, leadership, values of purpose and civic agency, memoir writing, family and role modeling, relationships with parents.

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Betty Rollin
Author

FIRST, YOU CRY

Summary: In her last interview before she passed away, Betty Rollin reflected on her life journey, marked by career shifts and personal challenges. She discusses how she used humor in her book *First, You Cry* about her battle with breast cancer. Rollin opens up about assisting her mother in peacefully ending her own battle with cancer and trying to cope with the loss of her husband.

Topics Discussed

- ▣ **Social Studies:** History of the feminist movement, one of the early woman news correspondents, helping her mother die with dignity.
- ▣ **English Language Arts:** Memoir, becoming a writer in a male-dominated field, getting breast cancer and publishing one of the first memoirs on surviving it, writing a book about helping her mother die, living with grief and anger because of her husband’s death, the power of storytelling.

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Mitt Romney
Politician

FAMILY TIES

Summary: Mitt Romney discusses his childhood, the values instilled by his parents, and the influence of his father, George Romney, a governor and cabinet member. He highlights his experience in the private sector and his political career as Governor of Massachusetts, Presidential candidate, and Senator from Utah. Romney emphasizes the importance of family, faith, and personal values – not career success – for a meaningful life.

Topics Discussed

- ▣ **Social Studies:** Coming-of-age in a political family, success in business and civic leadership, leadership overseeing the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics, serving as Governor of Massachusetts, Republican candidate for President in 2012, Senator from Utah, political courage and conviction during the Trump administration. A relevant addition in units exploring political leadership.
- ▣ **English Language Arts:** The central role of family and faith to his identity, early memories of feeling different as the only Mormon family in his community, overcoming political loss, political courage.

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Martin Sheen
Actor

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTIVISM

Summary: Martin Sheen discusses the origin of his stage name and the influence of his immigrant parents on his political views and spiritual beliefs. He delves into his activism, arrests, and community service. Sheen reflects on his long acting career, including the impact of his role in *The West Wing*, which inspired young people to pursue careers in public service.

Topics Discussed

- ▣ **Social Studies:** Becoming an activist, coming-of-age as a Latino man in the 1950s/60s, commitment to nonviolence.
- ▣ **English Language Arts:** Discovering method acting, navigating his Latino identity as an actor, blending the roles he takes on with his activism, the cultural influence of *The West Wing*, and reflections on the connections between his faith and his social activism in issues such as labor organizing, climate, and on behalf of political candidates.

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Darren Walker
President, Ford Foundation

HOPE AND COURAGE IN ACTION

Summary: Darren Walker recalls his childhood in Louisiana and early exposure to the Head Start program. He discusses his challenges and choices at the Ford Foundation, highlighting the need to address inequality. Walker reflects on the impact of the sudden death of his partner and the lessons of grace and generosity that guide him.

Topics Discussed

- ▣ **Social Studies:** President Johnson's War on Poverty, the origins of Head Start, the role of philanthropy and the arts in a democracy.
- ▣ **English Language Arts:** Exploring dignity as a value and virtue, the importance of the arts for a thriving democracy.

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Interviewer Bios

(In alphabetical order)

David Bender is a political activist, author and former host of the talk radio show *Politically Direct* on Air America Radio. Guests on his talk show included five Nobel Peace Prize Laureates: Jimmy Carter, Al Gore, Barack Obama, Desmond Tutu, and Elie Wiesel. In 2000, joining with the late musician David Crosby, he co-authored and co-produced a book and four-hour documentary series *Stand And Be Counted*, that recounted the history of artist activism on social and political issues. Mr. Bender has also conceived and produced *VISIBLE*, a documentary series chronicling the history and global impact of LGBTQ+ images originating on American television. This critically acclaimed series was released on the Apple+ streaming platform in 2020.



Ari Fishman is an accomplished executive producer with a diverse career spanning multiple platforms. He has had the privilege of contributing to some of the most iconic shows in television history. His journey has taken him through the vibrant worlds of Nickelodeon, Comedy Central (*The Daily Show With Jon Stewart*), PBS (*Charlie Rose*), HBO (*Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*), VICE, Adult Swim, Hulu (*Eater's Guide To The World*), and Netflix, each step driven by his unwavering commitment to illuminating narratives that resonate. His dedication to storytelling and production has been recognized through numerous accolades, including four Emmy Awards and two Peabody Awards. The art of cultivating compelling narratives has also led him to receive two Directing Emmy nominations and recognition from the prestigious James Beard Foundation.

Matt Henderson has worked in the film and television industry for over fifteen years. Currently, Matthew is the Program Director at the Kunhardt Foundation where he supports KFF's education initiatives by leading post-screening discussions with students and teachers, as well as building community partnerships with educational institutions and corporate partners. Matthew's passion for storytelling coupled with his ability to conceptualize and create compelling and soulful visuals has allowed him to film all around the world. Most recently, he has worked on *True Justice: Bryan Stevenson's Fight for Equality* (HBO, 2019); *John McCain: For Whom the Bell Tolls* (HBO, 2018); *King in the Wilderness* (HBO, 2018); *From the Ashes* (National Geographic, 2017); *AlphaGo* (Reel As Dirt, 2017); *Rolling Stone: Stories from the Edge* (HBO, 2017); and *Before the Flood* (National Geographic, 2016).

Noah Remnick is a journalist and educator based in New York City. He has a PhD in American history and teaches college courses at correctional facilities across New York through the Center for Justice at Columbia University. Noah has conducted numerous interviews with Life Stories; from Darren Walker to Cecile Richards and Reginald Dwayne Betts.

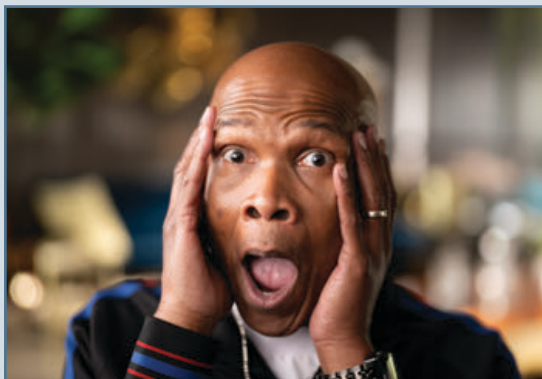
Mark Salter was the late Senator John McCain's chief of staff, foreign policy advisor, and senior advisor in his presidential campaigns. Salter is the author of *The Luckiest Man*, a memoir of his experiences working for Senator McCain, with whom he co-wrote seven books. He has collaborated on numerous *New York Times* bestsellers, including most recently, *Enough* by former Trump White House staffer Cassidy Hutchinson. He has written for several publications, including the *Washington Post* and *The Atlantic*. Salter was born and raised in Davenport, Iowa. He graduated from Georgetown University in 1981.

Nancy Steiner has been producing and directing nonfiction content for network and cable television for over 35 years. In addition to working at NBC and CBS, she has created series and one-off films for the Kunhardt Film Foundation, and most recently contributed to their comprehensive collection of online interviews, *The Thread*. Additionally Nancy created 50 short pieces for the Council on Foreign Relations about global diplomacy, currently shown in over 100 countries. She is a master certified life/executive coach at [Steiner Coaching Solutions](#), working with adults of all ages as well as entrepreneurs at the Harvard Business School.

Episode Themes

The versatility of *The Thread* invites creativity across disciplines. As you plan different approaches to incorporating these stories, here is one model of organizing episodes based on some of the themes discussed.

ART & CULTURE	DEMOCRACY & ACTIVISM	FAITH	TRAIL BLAZERS	POLITICS	WRITING & POETRY
Jason Alexander	Reginald Betts	Father Greg Boyle	Kurt Alexander	Cecile Richards	Reginald Betts
Kurt Alexander	Father Greg Boyle	Tova Friedman	Katie Couric	Mitt Romney	Roz Chast
Reginald Betts	Katie Couric	Rev. Dr. Jacqueline Lewis	Gloria Estefan	Martin Sheen	Katie Couric
Roz Chast	Rev. Dr. Jacqueline Lewis	Mitt Romney	Tova Friedman		Jason Reynolds
Gloria Estefan	Cecile Richards	Darren Walker	Tony Hawk		Betty Rollin
Tony Hawk	Martin Sheen		Betty Rollin		
Darren Walker	Martin Sheen		Mitt Romney		



Episode Lessons Overview

The Episode Lessons are examples of ways to integrate ***The Thread*** into learning and engagement opportunities. This learning journey through storytelling can expand the scope of your traditional subject matter and help students gain new perspectives on themselves and their world.

Each Episode Lesson includes:

- ▣ **Episode:** Name, occupation, title of interview
- ▣ **Interview Log:** Date, place, and name of interviewer
- ▣ **Biography:** Brief background of the interviewee
- ▣ **Episode Overview:** Overview of the scope of ***The Thread*** episode
- ▣ **Learning Objectives:** Relevant ELA and SS topics and themes discussed in the episode
- ▣ **Teaching Tips:** Two lesson activities for deeper engagement (First Take, ***The Thread*** Up Close)
- ▣ **Connections:** Discussion and writing prompts to deepen engagement and understanding
- ▣ **Activity:** Suggested engagement exercise connected to the topics and themes from the episode
- ▣ **Additional Resources:** For expanding student learning on the ideas, people, and events shared



The Thread



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