

OneAZ Credit Union

Breaking the Cycle

Three Voices. Three Dreams. One Cycle to Break.

A Short Documentary by Pearlette J. Ramos, PhD, JD

Supported by OneAZ Credit Union

FILM OVERVIEW

Breaking the Cycle is a 15-minute short documentary that examines the widening wealth gap in America through three lived experiences. At a time when conversations about economic inequality often rely on statistics alone, the film centers the human stories behind those numbers, revealing how systemic barriers shape financial opportunity and outcomes.

The documentary follows three individuals navigating different stages of financial life and entrepreneurship. Anthony, a Hispanic restaurant co-owner, is working to grow his business while investing in his community. Nella, a Native American caterer and aspiring restaurateur, reflects on growing up in a financial desert and the challenges of accessing capital to expand her culinary vision. Tomeka, an African American artist and writer, shares the vulnerability of approaching retirement without financial security.

Together, their stories illuminate the realities many underrepresented communities face when striving for financial stability and entrepreneurial success. It reveals how structural forces can limit access to capital even for those with vision, discipline, and determination. By elevating these authentic voices, *Breaking the Cycle* reframes financial wellness and entrepreneurship as issues shaped not only by personal choices but also by the systems and communities that influence access to economic opportunity.

Created by Pearlette J. Ramos, PhD, JD, a OneAZ Credit Union board member, *Breaking the Cycle* was developed as her capstone project for the Credit Union Diversity Education (CUDE) program through the World Council of Credit Unions. OneAZ Credit Union funded the film's production while preserving full creative independence to ensure the stories were told with authenticity and integrity, and plans to use the film to drive meaningful social impact in Arizona and beyond.

DIRECTOR STATEMENT

Pearlette J. Ramos, PhD, JD—

I created *Breaking the Cycle* to honor the lived experiences of those caught in cycles of financial struggle despite their hard work and dedication. This film centers those experiences and reframes financial hardship, not as a personal failure, but as the result of systems that have shaped opportunity unevenly for generations.

This story is personal. I grew up in a family that struggled just to make ends meet, and I understand the weight of financial instability. That experience continues to inform how I see money, opportunity, and access, not just as economic issues, but as deeply human ones.

Breaking the Cycle Press Kit

Proof.

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When people gain access to knowledge, capital, and the emotional freedom to reimagine their relationship with money, transformation becomes possible, not only for individuals, but for families and entire communities. Credit unions were founded on the belief that people overlooked by traditional financial systems deserve dignity, opportunity, and a fair chance to thrive.

My hope is that *Breaking the Cycle* encourages us to return to that mission with urgency, to listen more deeply, learn from the communities we serve, and work collectively to build financial systems where opportunity is truly within reach for everyone.

CEO STATEMENT

Mike Boden, President & CEO, OneAZ Credit Union –

At OneAZ, our mission is to truly improve the lives of our members, our associates and the communities we serve. Supporting *Breaking the Cycle* reflects our belief that meaningful progress begins with honest conversation. This film does not present financial institutions as perfect. It acknowledges systemic barriers and challenges our industry to do better, and we welcome that challenge. Credit unions are uniquely positioned to design inclusive products, build relationship-based banking models, and create pathways to economic mobility. We are proud to support a project that calls our movement forward and reinforces the responsibility we share in building financial systems that work for everyone.

ABOUT THE FILM

Runtime: 15 minutes

Format: Short Documentary

Subjects: Nella Belin, Anthony Aragon, and Tomeka Winborne

Kimber Lanning - CEO, Local First Arizona

Mike Boden - CEO, OneAZ Credit Union

David B. Miller - Professor, Case Western Reserve University

Each protagonist represents distinct lived experiences from historically underrepresented communities navigating entrepreneurship, credit access, and generational financial challenges.

Core themes include:

- Financial literacy as empowerment
- Structural barriers to wealth-building
- Entrepreneurship as both risk and resistance
- The unique role of credit unions in advancing economic justice

The film intentionally balances systemic critique with forward-looking solutions.

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THE WEALTH GAP

The wealth gap in the United States continues to widen. Historic practices such as redlining, exclusion from credit markets, and inequitable lending policies have compounded across generations. Inflation and rising living costs disproportionately impact lower-income households, while asset ownership continues to drive wealth accumulation elsewhere.

In Arizona, one of the fastest-growing and increasingly diverse states, addressing financial access and inclusive entrepreneurship is both an economic and moral imperative. *Breaking the Cycle* places human faces to these realities.

Data Sources Referenced in the Film:

1. *When a community has no banks or credit unions nearby, it becomes a financial desert — leaving families with lower financial knowledge, no credit history, and costly alternatives that follow them for life.*
 - a. [Federal Reserve – Banking Deserts & Branch Closures Research](#)
2. *Loan applicants of color face 40–80% higher denial rates — and in some cities, they're more than twice as likely to be turned down.*
 - a. [Federal Reserve Banks, Small Business Credit Survey: 2025 Report on Employer Firms](#)
3. *A study by SCORE found that 82% of small business fail due to cash flow problems.*
 - a. [SCORE: The #1 Reason Small Businesses Fail - And How to Avoid It](#)
 - b. [Business Insider & US Bank: Here's why small businesses fail](#)
4. *The retirement wealth gap means many people of color are much less likely than white households to meet their basic needs as they age.*
 - a. [U.S. Department of Labor: Achieving Financial Equity in Retirement](#)
5. *African American and Hispanic adults are far less likely to have learned about money from their parents.*
 - a. [Investor Education Foundation: The National Financial Capability Study](#)
 - b. [Financial Capability in the United States Results from the FINRA Foundation's National Financial Capability Study](#)
6. *In 2024, only 47% of Hispanic adults and 43% of African American adults had enough cash on hand for a \$400 emergency.*
 - a. [Federal Reserve Board - Survey of Household Economics and Decisionmaking Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2024](#)
7. *The wealth gap has nearly doubled since 1963, and communities of color are feeling it hardest.*
 - a. [Federal Reserve Historical Wealth Data](#)
 - b. [Greater Wealth, Greater Uncertainty: Changes in Racial Inequality in the Survey of Consumer Finances](#)
 - c. [Brookings: The Black-white wealth gap left Black households more vulnerable](#)

FOUNDATION ALIGNMENT

The film aligns directly with the OneAZ Community Foundation's pillars:

1. Economic Empowerment & Entrepreneurship
2. Community Vitality

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3. Developing Future Leaders

Since 2016, the OneAZ Community Foundation has invested more than \$2.5 million in Arizona nonprofits focused on economic resilience and long-term prosperity. *Breaking the Cycle* expands this commitment from financial investment to narrative leadership, reinforcing OneAZ's dedication to financial literacy and access. Through screenings, community conversations, and education initiatives tied to the film, OneAZ aims to reach 50,000 lives and deepen its impact across underserved communities.

THE CALL-TO-ACTION

The film is designed to activate institutions, not simply inform them. Credit unions were founded on the principle of people helping people. The question is no longer whether institutions should respond, but how.

For Financial Institutions: How can you design products, policies, and outreach strategies that reflect the lived realities of your members?

- Reevaluate lending models and underwriting practices.
- Invest in relationship-based banking.
- Design culturally responsive financial education programs.
- Partner with community entrepreneurs to co-create solutions.

For Community Organizations, Universities, and Nonprofits: How can you help create pathways to financial empowerment in the communities you serve?

- Host community screenings and facilitated conversations about financial equity and access to capital.
- Integrate discussions about financial systems, entrepreneurship, and wealth-building into educational programs and curricula.
- Provide culturally responsive financial education, mentorship, and coaching for emerging entrepreneurs and families.
- Partner with financial institutions and community leaders to co-create solutions that expand opportunity and close wealth gaps.

For Entrepreneurs and Community Members: Access tools, coaching, and culturally responsive financial education to build sustainable financial futures.

When communities come together to listen, learn, and collaborate, meaningful change becomes possible.

To learn more, host a screening, or access community resources, visit: OneAZcu.com/community.

IMPACT GOALS

- 25+ community & institutional screenings

Breaking the Cycle Press Kit

Proof.

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- 2,500+ toolkit downloads
 - 75,000+ Arizona PBS viewers
 - 100,000+ social impressions
 - 50+ credit unions engaged nationally and globally
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FOR PRESS & MEDIA

OneAZ Credit Union and Pearlette J. Ramos, PhD, JD, are available for live, virtual, phone, podcast, in-studio, and written interviews, including Q&As and contributed commentary.

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