

The Beal Conjecture

Genre: Comedy/Drama

Logline: When the Journey Is Worth More Than the Prize

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Michael Jones, a Black student from Chicago, attends the prestigious Kellogg University in Boston on a full-ride football scholarship as a wide receiver. Funny and charismatic, Michael is a cross between Denzel Washington and Eddie Murphy, and his success on the football field is as paramount as his failure in the classroom. His advancement through school has come only from the help of self-centered coaches who wanted championship teams and indifferent teachers who did not want to claim responsibility for holding him back.

Now in college, Michael continues to be pushed along—barely maintaining a “C” average (the minimum required to maintain his scholarship) with a “little” help from his teammates at Phi Beta Kegga—an illegitimate, self-proclaimed frat/animal house that lies among the other more prestigious and “legitimate” sororities and fraternities at Kellogg University. He is also pushed along with the help of his professors and department heads who have taken a renewed interest in the success of Kellogg’s football program now that their team—The Patriots—is in contention for the coveted Northeast Collegiate Conference title. There is one professor, however, who stands in the way of his qualifying grades and his full-ride scholarship at Kellogg: Mr. Wong.

Mr. Wong, who resembles a Mr. Miyagi in *Karate Kid*, is an old and seemingly unassuming professor whose small stature appears even more so before the 300-seat auditorium crowded with students that are required to take his basic college math class. He speaks with broken “Engrish” and is often the butt end of students’ jokes, especially Michael, who imitates the professor whenever and wherever he can. But Mr. Wong is as wise as he appears to be unassuming, and he has caught Michael every time he has attempted to cheat on his exams. His approach is kind and respectful, but definitive. No one will cheat in his class—no one.

The story begins on Parents Day--the traditional day when parents of the football players are honored before one of their opening fall games. Mr. Wong, the narrator of the story, begins with a voice over looking back upon his college experiences and the one student who stood out more than any other:

MR WONG: [voice over in broken English]

My name is Mr. Wong. I math professor at Kellogg University in Boston. I come to America 31 year ago from Cambodia—escape from Khmer Rouge. I love America. It good to me. Owe much to those who help me study hard, learn Engrish, and get good grade. I come to

University over 23 year ago—teach many many student over many many year, but one student I not forget...his name is Michael Jones.

As all of the players line up along side their parents that afternoon on the football field, Michael Jones stands alone. As the names of the players and parents are announced over the loudspeaker, Mr. Wong sees Michael standing by himself. He then gets up from his seat and hobbles across the football field with his cane looking like Yoda until he reaches Michael. Clearly embarrassed before the stadium fans, Michael tells Mr. Wong 'I don't need no one to stand with me'. Mr. Wong ignores him and smiles up at the crowd like a proud surrogate father as both of their names are announced together. It is a comical and odd dichotomy--a juxtaposition of two opposites standing together on the field that afternoon: a Black athlete and an old Asian man whose injured knee was the result of his escape from the Killing Fields of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. A few of the sarcastic fans say they can clearly see the resemblance between father and son. Michael then turns to Mr. Wong and says 'You owe me, Professor...extra credit or something, but you owe me.'

During the game that follows it is clear who is the star player. Michael's acrobatic catches and his taunting demeanor are all too apparent when he beats his opponents for touchdown after touchdown, then mocks his defenders in the end zone telling them "Professor Jones" has just schooled them. After the game, the Kellogg fans are celebrating victory and shaking his hand as he marches off the field. Soon, one of his professors brings his little son to get Michael's autograph

*The next day, all is good at the at the Phi Beta Kegga frat house where **Michael** is briefed by his **frat brothers** with various class assignments on what to do and what to give the various professors. Then during football practice, **Michael** runs down field and makes an astounding catch over the shoulder of a defender. One of the **coaches** comments to the **head coach** that, when something is out there that Michael wants, he gets it. The **head coach** nods approvingly, and after practice he tells **Michael** so, only there is one issue that concerns him: Michael needs to maintain his C scholarship to play football. He is doing well in all of his subjects but one: math. 'I got it covered coach . . . trust me,' he says.*

The next day Mr. Wong passes out one of his math exams. As the students begin writing their answers, one of the **students** from the frat house throws a coughing spell as a diversionary tactic, then fakes a heart attack. Students rush to his side while someone calls out for an ambulance. **Mr. Wong**, however, never breaks stride and never keeps his eyes off **Michael** as he sees another student slip him a cheat sheet during the commotion. **Mr. Wong** smiles gently and then tells **Michael** to please pass his cheat sheet up front as the coughing student continues to gasp for air.

*The next day in class **Mr. Wong** passes back the tests. Michael has failed it miserably. "It must be the wrong test, Mr. Wong," Michael protests. **Mr. Wong** examines the results and tells **Michael** that there has been no mistake. Now backed into a corner with his scholarship on the*

line and nowhere else to turn, Michael grasps for any lifeline he can get to save his athletic career. 'Well, how about extra credit? How about that extra credit you owe me?'

Mr. Jones, Mr. Wong replies 'You have one last final exam at end of quarter in two weeks to get good grade. Suggest you study hard—get good grade.' But Michael is persistent and knows now he will not pass the class without extra credit

'I aint never met a teacher who didn't give out extra credit,' Michael cries before the whole class. 'Anybody in here ever had a teacher that didn't give out extra credit?'

*The whole auditorium is in agreement, putting the pressure on **Mr. Wong** like Denzel Washington put pressure on Captain Robert Shaw to give Black soldiers equal pay in the movie **Glory**. **Mr. Wong** then grabs his cane and ponders the question. After a long pause, he smiles like an old chess master who has finally seen his opportunity.*

OK, Mr. Jones, I give extra credit—math riddle.

*He then writes down The Beal Conjecture on the chalkboard and tells him if he solves it he will give him an A+ but must solve it on or before the day of the final exam in two weeks. **Michael**, knowing he is not up for the task of solving the riddle alone, asks if his frat house can help. **Mr. Wong** stops for a moment and smiles. To Michael's surprise **Mr. Wong** says yes. Soon other frat houses and sorority houses are asking if they can get credit as well. Mr. Wong tells them that what is fair to one is fair to all. Suddenly it is every frat or sorority or ad hoc group for themselves. **THOMAS**, the head of the prestigious Sigma Nu Fraternity, stands up and tells everybody that his fraternity is going to get this thing figured out first.*

*The class laughs while **Mr. Wong** asks for and then starts writing down the names of all the fraternities, sororities, and other groups on the as students begin to congregate into groups. When the bell rings, all of the students shuffle out of the auditorium, but Michael stays behind. When the last of the students have left, Michael approaches Mr. Wong who is packing his papers into an old leather brief case and asks him why he came and stood with him on Parents Day. 'No one should stand alone on parents day or any other day.' he tells Michael. Michael tells him he doesn't need any one to stand for him or help him and that once he gets his NFL contract, he will finally have all he needs. Mr. Wong nods. "I see" is all he says.*

*Soon all of the fraternities and sororities are spying on each other to see if the other has any advantage or inside information about the "math riddle." Desperate to get any kind of edge, Michael suggest they recruit Mandeep, one of the expert math students from India to help their cause. Mandeep is as formal and polite as Michael's fraternity is rude and obnoxious. but in the course of time, Mandeep begins to reveal to Michael the real joys of math, that his mind is doing incredible calculations to adjust to the trajectory of each pass. Mandeep tells Michael how his mind is using math to calculate the distance of each defender that is trying to tackle him. Like the movie **Beautiful Mind**, you see mathematical calculations of Michel's every move on the football field, demonstrating the incredible aspects of math. Mandeep's understanding of numbers and tabulations fascinates Michael and suddenly his world is tipped upside down as he sees math in a whole new light. Mandeep begins to teach Michael*

math concepts by using football analogies and Michael is beginning to get it...but it is too little, too late.

No one has solved the riddle on the day of the final exam, and although Michael has improved, he knows he has bombed the test.

*It is a somber night for **Michael** and his **frat house**. He and his frat brothers sit on the porch for what appears to be the last time. As they are about to go in for the night, **Thomas** comes over with news that he found the riddle on line: **The Beal Conjecture**, which is worth one million to solve and has not been solved since it first came out in 1993. Suddenly, the realization sets in: the joke is on all of them. Thinking he and the rest of them college have been scammed by Mr. Wong into getting them to try and solve it for him so he can get the money, he pays Mr. Wong a visit that night and reads him the riot act telling him how he used students to advance his own financial agenda.*

After his tirade, he discovers that Mr. Wong never intended anyone to solve the Beal Conjecture; and his hope was that it would lead to a discovery of the love of math. If anyone had discovered it, he would have donated that money for college scholarships, contributing even more than what he currently does with his own salary. Stunned, Michael learns that the Khmer Rouge killed Mr. Wong's wife and family and that he injured his leg when trying to escape. When he made it to America, others gave him scholarships and he devoted his life to giving others the same opportunity. He then shows Michael a scrapbook of students he personally put through college. Dumbfounded, Michael finds himself respecting Mr. Wong, his sacrifices and his integrity and how he now understands he had only been cheating himself taking answers from others all his life.

Michael then thanks Mr. Wong and Mr. Wong tells him 'don't thank me, thank Mr. Beal-- the man who offered the reward.

*Next day in class **Mr. Wong** breaks the news that no one has solved the riddle. **Thomas** makes snide remarks to others that Mr. Wong tried to get their help to get the million dollars for himself. **Mr. Wong** then starts passing out the results of the exams, and, as the names are called, each student comes down to get his or her grade. When Michael Jones' name is called, no one comes forward. When Mr. Wong asks where Michael is, one of this fraternity brothers tells Mr. Wong that Michael 'aint coming back.' The auditorium is completely quiet.*

***Michael** sits in a plush office wearing a suit and tie. He sits before a **secretary** who eyes him suspiciously as he nervously fumbles with his hands. Suddenly the door opens and **Mr. Beal** comes out with an entourage of banking associates. **Michael** jumps up to shake his hand as the **secretary** tries to intervene.*

SECRETARY: I'm so sorry, Mr. Beal. He's been here for hours and won't leave.

[**Mr. Beal** excuses himself from his associates and then comes over to Michael, who reaches out to shake his hand.]

MICHAEL: Mr. Beal, I'm Michael Jones. You don't know me from Adam, but I just wanted to come and thank you personally.

MR BEAL: Thank me?

MICHAEL: Ah . . . yeah . . . to thank you for putting your math riddle out there.

MR BEAL: Oh, the Conjecture.

MICHAEL: Yeah . . . that conjecture thing.

MR BEAL: Well, thank you. So where are you from?

MICHAEL: Ah . . . Kellogg University—in Boston.

MR BEAL: Well, you've come a long way to thank me, Mr. Jones. What is the occasion? Did you figure it out?

MICHAEL: Ah, no, Sir, but someday I will.

MR BEAL: Well, that's great. Let me know when you do.

MICHAEL: Well, I wouldn't be hold your breath or nothing . . . I mean it's not like it's gonna happen tomorrow or the next day --or even the day after that next day and all—but just you wait. I'm gonna get that thing figured out, and I just wanted to let you know ahead of time so you aint surprised when I solve it and everything.

MR. BEAL (smiling): I won't

MICHAEL: And I ah...I ah...well I also just wanted to say thank you for what that challenge has meant to me.

MR BEAL: You're welcome.

MICHAEL: Yeah, well ah, thanks again.

[**Michael** reaches out and shakes his hand again and then turns and starts walking away.]

MR BEAL: Mr. Jones? . . . After I get through holding my breath, I'll be waiting to hear from you.

[A big smile breaks across **Michael's** face. He nods with a boyish enthusiasm and then turns and walks away.]

*The **Voice Over** narrative of **Mr. Wong** begins again as it did in the beginning of the story:*

MR WONG: It been over ten year now since Michael first come to University. Much happen since then. Football team get new coach . . . Manheed get married to Katherine, and have nine kids . . . whole soccer team. Thomas go on to be successful entrepreneur—start own trash and recycle company. Who was to know? . . . But Mr. Jones? . . . ah . . . Mr. Jones . . .

***Flashback** to when **Mr. Wong** is correcting Michael's last exam . . . There are red pencil marks all over the test. He writes D- at the top of the page and goes on to correcting the next exam. Suddenly he stops. He stares at the pile of corrected tests, then takes Michael's exam from the top and stares at his D-. After what appears to be a great internal debate, he takes his red marker and crosses out the D- and writes A+.*

MR WONG: [voice over] I never allow student to cheat on test, nor advance student who not deserve it, but that day I give Michael A+ on final exam. We all need help from time to time. With scholarship renewed, Michael come back to University and play three more year at football, (interject pictures here of Michael and Mr. Wong on three more Parent's Days) but not go on to NFL . . . No, Michael go onto greater thing. He study hard, get good grade, and go on to more school. (interject graduation pictures here of Michael in a cap and gown with Mr. Wong by his side) Now he at same school where he grow up—teaching math.

*The final scene is **Michael** standing in front of his high school math class giving out an assignment.*

MICHAEL: [writing the Beal Conjecture on the board] And for extra credit, I got a math riddle I want you all to try and solve...

[He turns to the class and smiles.]