

# POV

Community  
Engagement & Education

DISCUSSION GUIDE

## Homegoings

A Film by Christine Turner





NEW YORK, MARCH 2013

When I was 13, both of my grandmothers passed away within two weeks of one another. My mom's mother, who was Chinese-American, happened to be Methodist and was cremated, which was very atypical for traditional Chinese funerals. Meanwhile, my dad's mother, who was African-American and Catholic, had an open-casket funeral—the first I had ever attended—which left an indelible impression on me.

Though just a kid at the time, I remained curious about the different ways that cultures mourned death. Many years later, when I came across a newspaper article about a beloved Harlem undertaker who had a reputation for “beautifying” the dead, I was reminded of my own experiences at funerals and wanted to find out more.

When I first went to meet Isaiah Owens, I was immediately struck by how different he was from the stereotypical cold and reserved mortician. Instead, he was warm and had a sense of humor that one doesn't typically associate with an undertaker. He told me that caring for the dead was his lifelong “calling,” and that as a child he held his very first funerals for small animals on his family's farm. I couldn't help but wonder who he was and what it must be like to spend one's life burying the dead.

A few months later, I began to film Isaiah's everyday work at his funeral home. I quickly observed that he was a man who was not only a skilled cosmetologist, capable of restoring beauty to the deceased, but also an important pillar in the community who shepherded families in need through their times of grief, if only for a few days. At the same time, I recognized in Isaiah's personal story the legacy of slavery through sharecropping; the Great Migration of African-Americans from the south to the north in search of work; and an overall decline in funerary traditions today that made his work as an undertaker all the more rich.

Over the course of four years, I dropped in and out of Owens Funeral Home, not only filming Isaiah, but also interviewing the bereaved about their losses and about their differing views of death. For many, funerals were not only occasions to mourn, but also cause for celebration, as reflected in the various “homegoing” services seen in my film. While some viewed death as a release from the trials and tribulations of the world, others saw it simply as the next stage of a spiritual journey.

Whatever our beliefs, death is something we all must face and yet it is so often a taboo subject. With **Homegoings**, I wanted to open a conversation on death in a way that captured grief and sadness, but also the humor and the sense of relief that I sometimes observed from behind the camera. Ultimately, I hope that viewers will be reminded, as I was while filming, of the preciousness of life as much as the inevitability of death.

**Christine Turner**

Filmmaker, **Homegoings**





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**Writer**

Faith Rogow, PhD  
*Insighters Educational Consulting*

**Guide Producers and Background Research, POV**

Eliza Licht  
*Vice President,  
Community Engagement & Education, POV*

Jamie Dobie  
*Manager,  
Community Engagement & Education, POV*

Elana Meyers  
Luke McCord  
*Interns, Community Engagement & Education, POV*

**Design:**

Rafael Jiménez  
Eyeball

**Copy Editor:**

Natalie Danford

**Thanks to those who reviewed this guide:**

Christine Turner  
*Filmmaker, **Homegoings***

**INTRODUCTION**

Through the eyes of funeral director Isaiah Owens, the beauty and grace of African-American funerals are brought to life. Filmed at Owens Funeral Home in New York City’s historic Harlem neighborhood, **Homegoings** takes an up-close look at the rarely seen world of undertaking in the black community, where funeral rites draw on a rich palette of tradition, history and celebration. Combining cinéma vérité with intimate interviews and archival photographs, the film illustrates the unique ties that bind the dearly departed, their grieving families and a man who sends them “home.”





**Homegoings** is well suited for use in a variety of settings and is especially recommended for use with:

- **Your local PBS station**
- **Groups that have discussed previous PBS and POV films relating to funerals or African-American heritage, including *A Family Undertaking*, *El Velador (The Night Watchman)* and *The Barber of Birmingham: Foot Soldier of the Civil Rights Movement*.**
- **Groups focused on any of the issues listed in the Key Issues section**
- **High school students, youth groups and clubs**
- **Faith-based organizations and institutions**
- **Cultural, art and historical organizations, institutions and museums**
- **Civic, fraternal and community groups**
- **Academic departments and student groups at colleges, universities and high schools**
- **Community organizations with a mission to promote education and learning, such as local libraries**

**Homegoings** is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people looking to explore the following topics:

- **African-American heritage, history and community**
- **Death**
- **Family dynamics**
- **Funeral rituals**
- **Grieving**
- **Harlem**

## USING THIS GUIDE

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection, designed for people who want to use **Homegoings** to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit [www.pbs.org/pov/outreach](http://www.pbs.org/pov/outreach)



## What is a “Homegoing”?

During the era of the transatlantic slave trade, many African slaves in the United States thought of death as a reprieve. It was commonly held that dying meant one’s soul would be emancipated and would then return home to ancestral Africa in a “homegoing.” While the phrase “homegoing” is more commonly used in the African-American community today to mean a passing to the afterlife, death still carries a special spiritual significance in African-American culture and is often perceived as a transition rather than a final destination.

## The Role of Funeral Directors

In **Homegoings**, Owens Funeral Home customer Linda “Redd” Williams-Miller describes the African-American funeral this way: “Homegoing. A happy occasion... going home to be at peace... You’re going home to meet the ones that went on before you, and they’re there waiting for you.” Throughout **Homegoings**, Isaiah Owens relates the culture and history of death and mourning in the black community, harkening back to slavery and segregation. He explains that “when the slaves were killed... it wasn’t a proper funeral, but they kind of did their best... When they got down in the woods, away from the slave masters... they came up with songs like ‘Soon I will be done with the troubles of the world, going home to live with my God.’” He recalls that when he was growing up in a community in the South, the local funeral director was a lifeline. Owens says, “Whenever somebody got sick, they would call Mr. Bird at the funeral home, and then he would ride out in the country to tell my mother, ‘Such and such one is real sick in Philadelphia.’”

Owens recalls more recent history, too, noting that there was an era when Harlem was full of mom-and-pop funeral homes, each with a loyal clientele. But, he says, “Since 1968 I probably could count at least 20 or 25 funeral homes that have gone out of business.” He notes another trend: in the 1980s, many of the departed were victims of violence or AIDS, whereas today people are more likely to die of heart problems or stroke. Owens routinely receives invitations to sell his establishment to bigger companies, but he always turns them down. “I’m trying to create a business that could take care of my family for maybe the next hundred, 200 years,” he explains. In doing so, he is also carrying forward a legacy—dating back more than a century—of the black funeral director as a pillar of the community.

During the slave trade, death provided a rare time for slave communities to congregate, socialize and cel-

brate and, according to funeral historian Suzanne E. Smith, these gatherings helped lay the groundwork for African-American communal life in the post-slavery era. Such a celebration served to honor the body of someone who had not been honored in life, and the occasion provided an opportunity for the living to gather and discuss the path to freedom and liberation. A funeral director would often lead this conversation and the relative service and oversee rituals that included the preparation of the body, the “settin’ up” (sitting up with the body prior to burial), the burial itself and, in many cases, a second funeral that followed several weeks later.

These gatherings took on a more formal nature after the end of the Civil War under segregation. This marked the beginning of the modern African-American funeral industry. As there was less of a need to congregate in secret, funerals became more commercial public rituals and less intimate affairs. Still, many Afro-centric African-American communities retained slave funeral traditions, including some with roots in African tribal customs. Specific rites from the Bakongo and LaDogaa tribes and various other tribes in the Kongo-speaking region of Africa have been maintained. For example, the custom of placing significant household objects on graves was documented by historians in Georgia in 1843 and in Zaire in 1884. Other rituals with African roots include placing coins on the deceased’s eyes to keep them shut and in the deceased’s hands as a contribution to ancestors. Music and dance also remain a steady presence in many African-American funeral celebrations. While a typical white Christian funeral was a more somber event, mourning in the African tradition was followed by expressive dance, music, libations and offerings that would allow participants to release grief while celebrating a new phase of life for the deceased.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, an industry developed that became a path to economic independence for many African-American funeral directors. With segregation firmly in place, black undertakers performed services for their own communities that whites refused to offer, strengthening racial bonds and lending black funerals a cultural significance that was uniquely African-American. Black funeral homes started appearing in the United States, with the first established in 1876 in Savannah, Georgia. During the Civil War, embalming techniques had been developed to preserve the bodies of soldiers that were to be shipped home for burial, so funeral directors needed both to preserve and to bury bodies, further elevating their roles in the community. As embalming skills developed, the industry became increasingly professional. Undertakers could offer their com-



munities specialized services that could not be performed by individual family members. In *To Serve The Living: Funeral Directors and the African American Way of Death*, historian Suzanne E. Smith notes that funeral directors would sometimes adopt titles such as “embalming surgeon” and “mortician” in order to associate themselves with the medical field. In the eyes of the community, the role undertakers played in counseling the family and friends of the departed also put them on par with clergy.

The funeral directors’ financial freedom and positions as business leaders also played into the civil rights movement. Funeral homes became safe meeting places, and funeral directors were known to assist demonstrations and rallies (including the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott) by providing covert transportation in hearses. Funeral directors also used their community roles to combat some of the negative stereotypes of African-American culture that were emerging in radio, television and film. Advertisements for funeral homes deliberately projected a positive, respectable image of the black experience.

Funeral directors were thus placed at the center of ritual events with an almost unparalleled weight and power, both symbolically and economically, in African-American society. Attendance at funerals was and is nearly mandatory in many communities for family and friends, and funerals retain the aura of important civic and religious events. Modern African-American funerals are often triumphant and lavish, regardless of the economic class of the bereaved family, and are generally felt to be appropriate moments for financial and social investment.

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### About Isaiah Owens

Isaiah Owens is the quintessential self-made man. The son of a sharecropper, he grew up among people who made their living picking cotton. When a loved one died, he says, relatives “would sign a promissory note that when the cotton is ready this year, that they would come back and pay. The black funeral director wound up being a friend, somebody in the community that was stable, appeared to have means.”

But neither Owens nor his mother, Willie Mae Owens-Ross, who today works as a receptionist at his other funeral parlor, in Branchville, South Carolina, can completely account for Owens’ fascination with burials, even as a boy. When Isaiah Owens was five, he buried a matchstick and put flowers on top of the soil. After that he progressed to burying “frogs... chickens; I buried the mule that died. I buried the neighbor’s dog, and the dog’s name was Snowball.” Owens-Ross says with a smile, “Anything that he find dead, he buried. Can’t even think where he got it from.... But that was his calling.”

In 1968, this calling took then 17-year-old Owens to New York City, where he learned his craft. A few years later, he opened what would become one of Harlem’s most popular funeral homes. When he is dressing and beautifying the dead, he shows a dedication to craft and attention to detail that exemplify Owens Funeral Home’s motto: “where beauty softens your grief.” When talking with bereaved families, he is entirely focused on the members’ individual needs. (He seems to remember the name of everyone he’s ever buried, including Snowball.)

Owens has earned a number of awards over the years for his contributions to the community, and plaques of appreciation line the walls of his establishment. The most recent was received from his peers in the first district of the National Funeral Directors and Morticians Association.





**Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. If the mood seems tense, you can pose a general question and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion.**

**Please encourage people to stay in the room between the film and the discussion. If you save your break for an appropriate moment during the discussion, you won't lose the feeling of the film as you begin your dialogue.**

**One way to get a discussion going is to pose a general question such as:**

- **If you could ask anyone in the film a single question, who would you ask and what would you ask him or her?**
- **What did you learn from this film? What insights did it provide?**
- **Were you surprised by anything in this film?**
- **Describe a moment or scene in the film that you found particularly disturbing or moving. What was it about that scene that was especially compelling for you?**

## DISCUSSION PROMPTS

### Funerals

How do the funerals you see in the film use music? What is the power of music at times of grief or vulnerability?

What types of details are revealed in Isaiah Owens' conversation with Linda "Redd" Williams-Miller that might have been missed had she not met with him? How might these details ease the funeral experience for Williams-Miller's family when the time comes?

Owens explains, "In our [African-American] culture, the person that does your eulogy usually can stir people up and make them get really, really excited, so it gets them over that threshold of grief and sadness into the point of feeling like celebration." Have you ever attended a funeral like the ones shown in the film? What was the experience like for you? How did it compare to other funerals you have attended, seen or heard about?

The film shows a range of funeral practices, from a traditional church service to a vibrant parade. What can you learn about the culture of the deceased from a funeral?

### The Funeral Director

What did you learn from the film that you didn't know before about the profession of undertaking, preparing the deceased for viewing and burial and/or running a funeral home?

How would you describe Isaiah Owens' temperament, personality or character? How do these traits make him well-suited for his job?

What specific things does Isaiah Owens do to honor the deceased who come through his funeral home? How does he live up to the funeral home's slogan, "where beauty softens your grief"? How do his actions "soften grief"?

Owens says, "When I was a child I created make-believe funerals. People thought that I was strange because I was having this love affair with funerals and I guess death and dying... Now they realize that I was just born to do what I'm doing." How do you think a community might react today to a youngster seemingly obsessed with conducting funerals? What would be the benefits and drawbacks of that reaction?

Owens describes the slow disappearance of the "little mom-and-pop funeral home." Why were there once so many small funeral homes and what has changed to minimize that need today?



## Uniquely African American

What is the meaning of the word (and film title) “homegoing”? How does it reflect Owens’ belief that “for the slaves, death meant freedom. It meant that they would meet a judge that would be just and fair to them. Even for us today, death brings us justice.”

Owens says, “When I was growing up, people buried people by planting cotton. You know, they would go to the funeral home, and somebody would die and they would sign a promissory note that when the cotton is ready this year, that they would come back and pay.” How are funerals typically funded today? What do the changes tell us about social, economic and demographic changes in the community?

Owens recalls, “The black funeral director wound up being a friend, somebody in the community that was stable, appeared to have means. When I was growing up we didn’t have a telephone. Whenever somebody got sick, they would call Mr. Bird at the funeral home, and then he would ride out in the country to tell my mother, ‘Such and such one is real sick in Philadelphia,’ and that ‘your sister called.’” What is the role of the funeral director in the community today? What economic or social standing does a funeral director have? How did segregation shape that role and how has it changed since the legal end of segregation? How does the role compare to the roles of other service professionals in the community (e.g., barbers)?

Owens says, “When it comes to death and funerals, African American people, we have our own way. It has worked for us throughout the ages. It has kept us balanced, sane and everybody know that it’s going to be a sad, good time.” From what you see in the film and/or your own experience how would you describe the African-American “way” of doing funerals? How does it compare to the “ways” common in your family or community? What are the sources of those traditions?

## Dealing with Death

Linda Williams-Miller tells Owens, “When I talk about death, I talk about it like living. I don’t know if that’s the way I was raised in church, but there was a time that I would have been like, ‘Oh, I don’t want to talk about it, too.’ The more you go on in life, you see that you have to say, ‘Let’s prepare for this.’ It’s going to happen eventually.” Why do you think so many people are uncomfortable talking about death? Do you share that discomfort? Has it prevented you from doing the kind of planning that Williams-Miller did, or, like Williams-Miller, have you shared plans with loved ones, legal executors, clergy or a funeral home? If the latter, how did you get comfortable enough to deal with the topic?

Owens’ mother, Willie Mae Owens-Ross, says, “I always tell my kids give me my flowers while I live. I can smell them. I can see them. I can hold them. But when I’m laying up there in that bed of mine, I don’t care how many flowers you give me. I don’t know I got one. So give them to me now while I can enjoy them.” What things have you seen people do only after a loved one died that might have had more or different impact if they had been done while the loved one was living?

The film ends with Owens repeating words that he hears at almost everybody’s funeral, “In the midst of life, we are in death.” What do you think those words mean to him? What do they mean to you?

**Additional media literacy questions are available at:**  
[www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php](http://www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php)

## Taking Action

- Convene a family meeting to discuss what will happen in the event that a family member dies. Let each family member write out his or her wishes in terms of the funeral ritual and make sure you all understand one another's instructions. If applicable, plan how funeral expenses will be covered.
- Hold a study session or series on what your faith tradition or philosophical belief system teaches about death and dying.
- Isaiah Owens explains that he sees patterns in causes of death: "In the Eighties, you had... If it was 10 people downstairs that had died, there were probably four homicides, four people or five people with AIDS. Now, most of the people that come are people that die from natural causes. Heart problems, cancer, hypertension—especially in our community. We have a lot of death from strokes." Survey the funeral homes in your area to determine current patterns. Based on what you find, create a public health campaign to educate people about prevention measures they could take.
- Train as a hospice volunteer or shadow an undertaker and learn more about what he or she does to ease the transition from life into death.
- *Homegoings* is one story of many about funeral traditions and POV wants to share all of the traditions of the cultures that make up America. Contribute your family's stories for an opportunity to be included in a national database being created at <http://bit.ly/funeraltraditions>. Share unique ways your culture honors those who've passed.

**FILMMAKER WEBSITE****[www.homegoings.com](http://www.homegoings.com)**

In addition to information about the film and filmmakers, the site includes a listing of upcoming screenings.

**Original Online Content on POV**

To further enhance the broadcast, POV has produced an interactive website to enable viewers to explore the film in greater depth. The **Homegoings** website—[www.pbs.org/pov/Homegoings](http://www.pbs.org/pov/Homegoings)—offers a streaming video trailer for the film; an interview with Christine Turner; a list of related websites, articles and books; a downloadable discussion guide; and special features, including crowd-sourced conversations about death and dying.

**What's Your POV?**

Share your thoughts about **Homegoings**

by posting a comment at <http://www.pbs.org/pov/homegoings>

**Isaiah Owens**

**THE NEW YORK TIMES: "LIVING BY A CREED: DEATH BE NOT UGLY; HARLEM UNDERTAKER SOFTENS GRIEF BY TAKING GREAT CARE IN HIS WORK"**

**[www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)**

This article is a portrait of Isaiah Owens.

**OWENS FUNERAL HOME****[www.isaiahowensenterprises.com/](http://www.isaiahowensenterprises.com/)**

The website of Owens Funeral Home includes history about Isaiah Owens and the business, as well as information about available services.

**Funerals and Funeral Homes****AARP****[www.aarp.org/griefandloss](http://www.aarp.org/griefandloss)**

This website page offers information on supporting people who are grieving, as well as on preparing both legally and emotionally for end-of-life care and burial/cremation.

**DYING IN AMERICA: A CHRONOLOGY****[www.pbs.org/pov/afamilyundertaking](http://www.pbs.org/pov/afamilyundertaking)**

One of the resources developed for the POV film *A Family Undertaking*, this is an overview of how funeral practices have changed over time.

**FUNERAL CONSUMERS ALLIANCE****[www.funerals.org](http://www.funerals.org)**

This source of references on death care and funerals includes planning guides for families in both English and Spanish, state-by-state rights and regulations and an excellent list of links to related organizations.

## HOW TO BUY THE FILM

To order **Homegoings** for home use, go to [www.homegoings.com](http://www.homegoings.com).  
To order **Homegoings** for educational use, go to [www.newsreel.org](http://www.newsreel.org).



Produced by American Documentary, Inc. and beginning its 26th season on PBS in 2013, the award-winning POV series is the longest-running showcase on American television to feature the work of today's best independent documentary filmmakers. Airing June through September with primetime specials during the year, POV has brought more than 300 acclaimed documentaries to millions nationwide and has a Webby Award-winning online series, *POV's Borders*. Since 1988, POV has pioneered the art of presentation and outreach using independent nonfiction media to build new communities in conversation about today's most pressing social issues. Visit [www.pbs.org/pov](http://www.pbs.org/pov).

### POV Digital [www.pbs.org/pov](http://www.pbs.org/pov)

POV's award-winning website extends the life of our films online with interactive features, interviews, updates, video and educational content, as well as listings for television broadcasts, community screenings and films available online. The *POV Blog* is a gathering place for documentary fans and filmmakers to discuss their favorite films and get the latest news.

### POV Community Engagement and Education

POV films can be seen at more than 450 events nationwide every year. Together with schools, organizations and local PBS stations, POV facilitates free community screenings and produces free resources to accompany our films, including discussion guides and curriculum-based lesson plans. With our community partners, we inspire dialogue around the most important social issues of our time.

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### American Documentary, Inc. [www.amdoc.org](http://www.amdoc.org)

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying, and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream-media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic-engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, online, and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational opportunities and community participation.

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**Front cover: Isaiah Owens returns to his hometown of Branchville, South Carolina.**

Photo courtesy of Peralta Pictures



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