
MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

A MAINE BLACK ELDERS PHOTOVOICE PROJECT

DECEMBER 2025



Making the Invisible Visible:
A Maine Black Elders Photovoice Project

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Evaluation Report

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Finally, we wish to thank Jess Maurer, the Maine Council on Aging’s Executive Director, who had the foresight and commitment to say “we will do this” even when it was not clear where the money would come from.



PART ONE

Project Background & Methods

Project Background

The Maine Council on Aging (MCOA) is the project home for the Black/African-descended Elders in Maine initiative. In 2022, following MCOA's Change AGent Summit, several conference attendees suggested forming a BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, Persons of Color) Elders group to gather periodically to discuss topics related to aging given that there is a lack of data and high quality information about BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, Persons of Color) Elder experiences. To begin building a profile of aging as a person of color in Maine, a few older adults began to gather periodically to discuss their experiences and share their knowledge about black life in Maine. The contact list currently includes approximately 50 Black/African-descended Elders, Immigrants, family members, and community members who work alongside them. In one of the subsequent meetings of the BIPOC Elders group, the conversation landed on a Photovoice project in New Hampshire that sounded intriguing. That conversation sparked a months-long pursuit of project planning and fundraising that leveraged the drive and passion of the BIPOC Elders group and several of the MCOA staff and leadership.

BIPOC Elders Group

Retired professor Leslie Hill's 2022 presentation, *Intersections of Ageism with Racism and Sexism*, sparked curiosity about Black Elders' experiences of aging in Maine. With encouragement from MCOA, Leslie, a person of color, and MCOA staff member, Kathy Vezina, reached out to possibly interested older adults from racial- ethnic communities around Maine to create an Elders group. The formation of the BIPOC Elders in 2023 has developed into a well-informed social community for persons of color who have resided in Maine for any number of years – some for a few months, others for decades or generations. The group gathers regularly, sometimes in person, other times virtually to accommodate members who live distant from Portland. In person convenings occur at different venues in southern and central Maine and at times at the Portland office of [The](#)



Third Place, Attendance is fluid but everyone on the mailing list of over 50 people is invited and welcomed.

The BIPOC Elders group leverages the common goals of MCOA's Equity & Healthy Aging staff who help coordinate meetings and community outreach. The focus of gatherings is sometimes purely social and at other times more structured with discussion prompts, speakers, or planned outings. Group conversations surface recurring themes, most notably celebrating their "strides and accomplishments" along with experiences of being dismissed, ignored, and excluded as residents, workers, professionals, and community-builders in Maine. Inspired to do more than just talk, BIPOC Elders participants want to meaningfully contribute to the experience of Black people aging in Maine.

Photovoice Idea

The original PV idea was inspired by a photovoice project in New Hampshire featuring the images and reflections of older adults from Black and other marginalized communities. There was immediate interest in learning more and exploring the possibility of a PV project to enhance the visibility of African-descended older adults, many of whom feel invisible in a state that is predominantly white. MCOA Executive Director, Jess Maurer, proposed the idea of creating a project team to look for funding opportunities to design and implement a PV initiative inviting BIPOC Elders to join as project participants. Leslie and Kathy searched for Maine-based talent to help guide the project, recruiting Genius Black (a/k/a Jerry Edwards), to document the project, and Partnerships for Health's PV consultants, Michelle Mitchell, Michelle Munsey, and Chad Mitchell, to providing coaching assistance.

Funding Successes and Challenges

The project team developed proposal material highlighting the importance of "showcasing the often-overlooked stories" of the BIPOC community through an approach that would "build and strengthen [the] connections" among the group. Despite the use of an evidence-based methodology and a compelling sociological need for the project, the team experienced challenges from funders whose funding categories focused on either art/cultural production or social justice. A handful, however, saw possibilities for new learning in the combination of storytelling about visual images that could evoke stories of experience and meaning. Ultimately the project was funded by seven sources including the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous,

and Tribal Populations, AARP, Southern Maine Agency on Aging, the Maine Arts Commission, Maine Initiatives, and Carol Wishcamper & Half My DAF, in addition to private donations.

Photovoice Methodology

In General

At its core, PV is a participatory method of storytelling through the visual photograph medium. Its goal is to see the lived experience of the photographer through their eyes, capturing people, places, elements, nature, time of day, in ways that evoke emotion, feeling, or experience in ways that written or spoken storytelling often cannot. It “combine[s] photography, critical dialogue, and experiential knowledge, participants reflect on and communicate their community’s concerns to represent their culture, to expose social problems, and to ignite social change” (Sutton-Brown, 2015). Most often used with underserved or historically marginalized social groups or communities, a principal goal of PV is to empower individuals to capture and share their experiences as an advocacy pathway for raising awareness and influencing policy change.

PV participants convene as a group and are oriented to the methodology, the process, and the specific project. They receive cameras for a limited amount of time but otherwise have autonomy to take photographs whenever and whatever they choose. Once the photographs are available - either in print or digital format - the group reconvenes to discuss their work, find common themes, and decide how to display their work so that the display to others or to the public captures their essential messages.

BIPOC Elders PV Methods

Orientation

The BIPOC Elders PV project participants met several times starting with an orientation session on September 30, 2024 that provided an opportunity for participants to get to know each other, understand the vision and goals of the project along with its timeframe and logistics, and to explore the PV framing questions, those probing questions that would be pondered through the PV process and reflected in the photographs. The participants then were grouped in pairs to offer reflections on the project, their own personal goals, and how each might approach and document the PV tasks. The remaining orientation time covered fine PV process details such as obtaining consents,

media releases, ethical considerations, and practicing with the camera so that all participants felt comfortable moving into the photo-taking phase.



Framing questions

The PV participant group discussed framing questions that would guide their photo capturing process to focus and guide the imagery. The final agreed-upon framing questions were as follows:

1. What does it mean to you to be black and aging in Maine?

2. In what ways do you feel invisible in your day-to-day life?
3. In what ways do you feel your community is unseen?
4. What can be done to make Black Elders (more) visible in Maine?

Photography

The PV participants received their cameras at the orientation session and had ten days to take photographs and return the camera to MCOA for developing and printing. Ten days was discussed and agreed upon based on advice from Partnerships for Health coaches, the PV methodology, and the practicalities of participants' daily lives.

Final workshop

On October 15, 2024, the PV participants and the project facilitation team convened for a full day workshop where the participants shared and appreciated each other's photos, selected those most meaningful to them, and developed stories that best reflected their responses to the framing questions. In pairs, participants shared their photographs, discussed their meaning and context for each image, and organized the photographs according to the framing questions. Pairs then doubled up to present their selections on photo storyboards. Each small group gave a 15-minute oral presentation of their team's board to the whole group. The full group reviewed and analyzed themes captured on the boards using probing questions. Facilitators asked questions such as *What did you learn about yourself and this group? What would you like to happen next?* The group discussed parameters of an inaugural exhibit of the PV storyboards. The final workshop and interactions among the group were captured in video recordings and images taken by PV facilitator team member, Genius Black. He ultimately created a project video and an overall storyboard focusing on the themes the group identified.

Evaluation Purpose and Data Collection

Evaluation Purpose - formative

While the primary purpose of the evaluation was to understand its summative impacts, the PV leads did want to explore a few formative aspects of the project, particularly in light of the possibility of future replication. They observed and reported to this evaluator, for instance, the challenges with securing funding, the difficulty in recruiting participants, the unexpected time involved in convening the PV workshops, managing the photo displays, and planning the public audiences, and the joys, highlights, and community-building aspects of the project. The PV implementation lessons have been valuable and

will be considered for creating greater efficiency and cost effectiveness for future projects.

Evaluation Purpose - summative

The primary purpose of the evaluation was to explore and highlight the experience of the PV participants relative to the goals of the PV methodology. For instance, did participants feel that PV was an avenue for reflecting on their own lived experiences in Maine as members of an historically marginalized group? Did they experience themselves as “knowledge holders” and did the inherent reflection required by the photographic medium offer insight and keener awareness of place within existing social structures? Did the collaborations required in the process allow them to feel more connected to each other and to Black communities in Maine? Most importantly, did participants feel that this project helps to challenge their invisibility?

The PV evaluation also seeks to understand the connections made between and among participants. It also aims to recognize the reaction of the public when exposed to the images and/or participant commentary about the photographs.

Evaluation Data Collection

Throughout the PV project, MCOA staff kept informal notes about the project progression. They engaged a videographer to record aspects of the various PV group convenings to capture the camaraderie among them and the power of the PV group dynamic, which was a critical aspect of the project. A written evaluation form was distributed to the audience of the PV unveiling in January 2025, the responses to which were analyzed for key themes. One focus group of participants was held in February to explore evaluation-related questions about participant experiences in the PV project.

Photovoice Recruitment

The project team recruited PV participants first by explaining the project in several group conversations and then reaching out directly to individuals to answer questions and confirm participation for those interested. Recruitment audiences included people involved with the BIPOC Elders, new Mainers and recent arrivals, and personal and professional contacts of the project team. Because the concept of PV was unfamiliar and the project goals nuanced and potentially sensitive, recruitment took longer than expected. Some prospective participants felt uncomfortable with the creative demand the project required; others needed some time to reflect and warm up to the idea of

participating. Four new Mainers who originally signed up to participate subsequently left the project citing a variety of reasons. Project staff expressed that the recruitment process and timeline offered a key lesson learned that future projects should anticipate recruitment lead time so prospective participants do not feel undue pressure to decide, leaving time for adequate reflection on project goals and one's capacity to participate.



PART TWO: Project Outcomes

Project Outputs

The PV project implementation included a series of project lead and participant convenings and produced dozens of images which contributed to video recordings and public exhibits as follows:

Convenings	Participants	Images	Videos	Exhibits & Presentations
2	6	120	1	4

Photographic images and storyboards

Each participant was asked to take 20 images on their digital camera for a total of 120 participant images.¹ Through the process, selected images were displayed on two group storyboards reflecting the group's consensus of how the images responded to each framing question. A third storyboard was created by Genius Black from these photos to highlight the cumulative themes emerging from the storytelling and reflections.

Exhibits

The PV project held an inaugural public exhibition on January 28, 2025, that hosted approximately 75 people. The exhibition featured opening remarks by MCOA Executive Director, Jess Maurer, remarks by several PV participants, and a showing of the PV workshop video created by Genius Black. The three storyboards were on display for public viewing and the participant team members were available to answer attendee questions and comment on their experiences as project participants. Evaluation forms

¹ Ten participants attended the first orientation convening. Four were unable to continue to participate in the workshop. Two of those four submitted photos, but only the 120 photos from the people participating in the workshop were used.

were distributed to and completed by all attendees, including PV participants and members of the public.

Thus far, three additional showings/presentations of the PV project have been offered, including at the Maine Philanthropy Conference on May 28, 2025, at The Third Place Juneteenth Celebration on June 19, 2025, and at the Lewiston/Auburn Senior College on October 14, 2025. In addition, the project has been presented to the BIPOC Elders group on two occasions: February 19, 2025, and April 28, 2025.

Project Objectives: Themes

The PV participants discussed their experiences in formal and informal conversations and in written evaluation forms after the completion of the photo-generating aspect of the project. Their comments, along with the comments of members of the public PV audiences, were organized according to several key themes.

Emotional responses to the Photovoice method

The participants and the audience reported an emotional reaction to the PV method with a predominant emotion-reaction of having experienced *a deeper understanding of Black Elder lived experience*. The personal nature of the participant photography was appreciated and respected by viewers. One viewer expressed, "How personal –and intimate—the experiences are, which is not so much surprising as a reminder of how many stories live within each of us." Another attendee stated "I am so thankful and inspired...[T]he stories were impactful and the connectivity and heartfulness in the room/project was palpable. I am so thankful I got to be here tonight. I'm moved to pieces."

There were recurrent observations about the reality and legacy of the Black Elder lived experiences in Maine. The audience expressed a newfound sensitivity to the encounters revealed in the photos, with one audience member succinctly remarking, "I feel motivated to be more aware –to see—to listen—to take note of those who may feel or be invisible, particularly older adults". Another audience member shared that they had learned "Black elders fear isolation while aging in Maine", while additional viewers saw this as a call to become more involved. "It motivates me to prioritize relationship building with Maine Black Elders!".

Participants likened their experiences to ancestral practices of storytelling. One stated, "[T]his IS the beginning. This small project can be the beginning of a continuum. The

idea of telling stories and keeping it going.") Participants expressed feelings of being seen and emboldened by both the process and the culmination of the project in its public display. Participants deeply appreciated the power of storytelling using the PV method with one stating: "Something very powerful [is] happening. When people saw that video, people were emotional (those feelings are in the video). [That] helps to quantify what I witnessed." Another noted "It made me realize how important storytelling is and how it brings about social change. Example: I loved the Mac & Cheese recipe, photo of Talbot Elementary. I grew up in Maine and recognize the places/people in the photos."

Younger audience participants experienced connection with the PV participant Elders; "As a Black 30-year-old, I was not surprised at the clear parallels, but it feels unifying across generations."



Fostering community and intimacy

The intimate nature of the photographs and narratives appeared to speak to a core need of both participants and viewers: community. The PV process itself acted as scaffolding for deeper, more connected conversations among the participants. Overall, the group was open about how their own sense of community was bolstered and strengthened during the project. One participant remarked, "The group 'fostered community' over the months that we met; 'I wish for more of that' b/c it was just a beginning." Another elaborated, "Yes, fostering community was the primary goal met. We will all still be connected because of this project...We were 'vulnerable' when we went through the process; [we] shared intimacy."

The sense of an intimate and personal connection among the PV participants appeared to grow out of a "vulnerability" that members felt; "We were 'vulnerable' when we went through the process; we shared intimacy." One noted that "where previously we were individuals, we are now a group." At a literal and emotional level, the project required tapping into one's creativity and this "creative process" also paved the way for participants' "honesty and vulnerability". Several described the process as "healing", "intimate", and "courageous". Another said they feel "motivated to be more aware - to see, to listen, to take notes - of those who may feel or be invisible, particularly older adults."

Audience reactions ranged from admiration ("Kudos on the courage to be so open") to recognition of the power of this community; "The intimacy created among the participants" was evident. Another viewer noted, "I loved the focus on intergenerational connection and found myself deeply impacted by the power of these connections."

Further responses showcased the intrinsic empowerment that the participants experienced and demonstrated that this could be a permanent positive outcome for Black Elders in Maine. Throughout the PV process and display, both participants and viewers remarked multiple times on the humanity evident in this project, with one audience member commenting, "Seeing the elders work through the photos was moving, showing the power of image, words, and connection." Another stated, the exhibit was "absolutely beautiful and thought-provoking. It made me think about the deeply held values of each of us that we don't talk about in day-to-day life. To hear people's stories was so moving."

Implications for justice at the intersection of ageism and racism

For participants and audiences alike, the PV project awakened awareness of historic injustices and the ongoing need for visibility of Black elders, recognition of past wrongs, and the use of stories and lived experiences as a means to raise awareness of systemic racism. Participants were reminded, “We all have histories and they are all important.” Another noted they could “relat[e] to my enslaved ancestor every day” and questioned, “how do we prevent this? Can changing the narrative help us, so we are changing the way people think?”

Participants confirmed for each other that “most of us have experienced racism and those stories must be told.” The PV project allowed participants to “take a ‘crack’ at elevating visibility of Black elders and the display was an introduction to raising awareness.” The intersections of race and age also moved the exhibit audience; “Hearing a black elder express their vulnerability compounded by aging.” Another could see that “Black elders fear isolation while aging in Maine.”

Exhibit audience members felt similarly and they drew from the images that “[t]he issues of aging are compounded by a lifetime of extensive racism and invisibility.” Exhibit attendees newly exposed to the Black experience suggested that there is a “lack of education about Black history in Maine and that “there is more to share; [this is] just a drop of history.” Another suggested that there is so much more to learn that the PV project “should be funded annually.”

The value of the Photovoice process

The PV participants weighed in on the PV processes and outcomes with several noting that they would have liked more time to take photos and that “the process is not over; let’s acknowledge that.” Much like the public audience’s acknowledgment that there are many more stories to tell, participants wanted more time to reflect on the goals of the project and “the best ways to present [the images].” Some were challenged by the framing questions and felt they could “be more straightforward and rephrased [and] the language more accessible.” Some literally wanted more time with the camera; “if there is a way to give more time; I turned in my camera and I felt like the pictures didn’t reflect all that I wanted. By the time I realized what we should be doing, I didn’t have enough time.” Participants appreciated the time spent in the workshops, which “supported a deep connection”. Some may have needed or wanted more workshop time as a way to hear more from project peers. One participant stated, “I was very affected by some of the

stories that I heard, but I only got bits and pieces." These comments also reflect the power of "story" not only to the outside world, but to the project participants themselves.

This participant summed up the biggest frustration: "[p]erhaps the only challenge is documenting in a handful of photos the answers to those deep and important questions."



PART THREE: Opportunities for Wider Dissemination

Since the completion of the PV project and the inaugural exhibit, the project team has worked with each other, with the PV participants, and with community partners to arrange for further amplification of the PV images and videos to wider audiences and via a range of platforms. The project team has considered gallery exhibitions, digital platforms, and derivative video clips of individual participants or participant teams.

Opportunities for Project Amplification

As of this writing, the project team has been accepted for a presentation at the American Society on Aging's 2026 annual conference, *OnAging*, in Atlanta, GA and has heard from many community partners expressing interest in the project including: the Maine Arts Commission, the Maine Historical Society, various libraries, and The Mill in Lewiston (for a larger storytelling exhibit).

The team has also begun conversations with the City of Portland for a mentoring project with the BIPOC Elders and high school students to discuss civil rights reflections.

Opportunities for Policy Change

The project team looks forward to ongoing conversations among the PV participants, the larger BIPOC Elders group, state and local advocates, and policymakers to discuss policy change proposals that will support greater visibility of historical and current lived experiences of African-descended individuals of all ages in Maine. In a predominantly White state, the policy needs of Black and African American people remain marginal. The PV project and its associated stories is a key antidote.





APPENDIX

Project Participants

James Ford

Toni Goncalves

Carla Hunt

Lauress Lawrence

Adelaide Solomon-Jordan

Robin Talbot

Project Team

Leslie Hill, PhD

Leslie lives her “Third Chapter” as an African American elder in Maine, retired from the Bates College faculty. While a member of its Politics Department, she also helped create interdisciplinary majors in Women’s Studies - now Gender & Sexuality Studies, American Cultural Studies, and African American – now Africana – Studies. Since retirement, her community engagements with Maine philanthropies focus on funding efforts that disrupt legacies of white supremacy, settler colonialism, and racialized capitalism while supporting non-profit organizations whose efforts engage people in reimagining policies, practices, and systems that make it possible for everyone to thrive. Her own “community organizing” – with support from the Maine Council on Aging – entails convening Black Elders to make their resilience visible, their voices heard, and to highlight their value and vibrancy as resources for Maine communities. Leslie believes that storytelling can be a powerful tool for community engagements that might reimagine small “d” democratic practices. She sees our world rich with opportunities to generate multiracial, intergenerational, and cross-class collaborations to build a world where power is shared and everyone can thrive.



Kathy Vezina, JD, RN, MSN

Kathy Vezina serves as the Maine Council on Aging Equity & Healthy Aging Initiative Director and content lead on the Reducing Ageism in Healthcare Team. Kathy is a Registered Nurse, a Nurse Practitioner (inactive), and a Maine attorney (inactive) and has worked in leadership roles in leadership development, community behavioral health, and reproductive justice organizations, and in private practice in a health law firm. She is a graduate of the University of Maine School of Law and the University of California San Francisco in Nursing. Over the past 15 years, Kathy worked in collaboration with varied organizations serving historically and currently marginalized communities to raise awareness and address health and other inequities. Prior to working with MCOA, Kathy has worked as the Associate Executive Director of the Hanley Center for Health Leadership, the Chief Administrative Officer; Legal Counsel for Counseling Services Inc (a comprehensive community behavioral health organization serving York and Cumberland counties), an attorney at the Health Law Firm of Kozak & Gayer, Nursing Faculty at the University of Southern Maine and Adjunct Faculty at the University of Maine's Muskie School of Public Service teaching a Health Law course.

Genius Black (a/k/a Jerry Edwards)

Genius Black, also known as Jerry Edwards, is a social innovator, podcast host, and grant writer based in Maine. Naturally a storyteller and motivator, he focuses on collaboration and media arts. Genius curates a collaborative collective of musical talent, GEM CITY Maine. He holds a degree in Africana Studies from Bowdoin College and was a founding Co-Director of Black Owned Maine. He is the father of two, 18 and 21 years old. He produces and hosts Maine's Black Future podcast with the Maine Monitor, focusing on historic and current influential Black Mainers. The podcast was awarded a multi-generational 'Grants for Change' award in 2023, and Genius was named the Maine Arts Commission Media Arts Fellow for 2024. Genius is a Portland Media Center and Portland Ovarations board member, and he honorably served as Emcee for the Maine Immigration Forum's inaugural event in 2023. Genius appears on the state-wide "Political Brew" talk show, as a political analyst for NewsCenter Maine. He recently produced "Making the Invisible Visible", a Maine Black elders Photovoice video. He is also the Digital Media Coordinator for the Maine Humanities Council and Propel and the Greater Portland Chamber of Commerce's "Community Leader of the Year" for 2025.



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