

# SJAM

## Social Justice Alliance for Museums



Case Study provided by:

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### History and Reconstruction

Difficult history is a continuing challenge for museums and other historical organizations. A new project is now testing how such material affects people, and what measures are needed to support them as they learn.

Pew's Center for Arts and Heritage has funded a project matching academic historians in the field of African American history with Reconstruction, Inc. a grass-roots organization of black ex-offenders, for the purposes of personal transformation and empowerment. Historians have talked to them about (for instance) the early laws of Virginia, and how the colony worked to separate whites and Africans from each other and to enforce evolving regulations controlling black behavior. In this case, the purpose was to look at the origins of state control of racial issues and of structural racism. We had three other sessions as well.

Not surprisingly, this experience has been disturbing for many of our participants. However, we provide group discussion and counseling with an African American psychologist to help people sort through their anger, confusion, and curiosity, as well as any personal issues this psychically charged material might bring up.

The participants also work with a black storyteller, who provides culturally appropriate responses to the material and puts the cohort members, ten men black men aged 21 to 72, into action. Soon they'll be going out to speak with members of the community about their experience; some are truly excited about this possibility.

To provide a modicum of measurement, the Positive Psychology department at the University of Pennsylvania is doing pre- and post-testing (now under way) with a variety of happiness and self sufficiency instruments. The consensus is that the program was tough, but that all have come through much better grounded, able to interpret their environment and its risks, and simply energized.

We therefore suggest that audiences can handle the most difficult material, but need opportunities for dialog to support them while they absorb it, as well as opportunities for action, if appropriate, to put their newfound knowledge to work.

*For more information on the project you can contact Phillip Seitz at the email address above.*

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