



## ENGAGEMENT GUIDE



# Table of Contents

Letter from Filmmaker Eric D. Seals .....	3
Letter from Film Participant Donnie Seals, Sr. ....	4
About the Film .....	5
FILM SYNOPSIS .....	5
SCREENING GOALS AND OBJECTIVES .....	5
THEMES TO EXPLORE .....	6
Discussing the Film .....	7
FRAMING THE CONVERSATION .....	7
STARTING THE CONVERSATION .....	8
Topics and Themes .....	9
UNDERSTANDING HEALTH DISPARITIES IN BLACK COMMUNITIES .....	9
ENCOURAGING COMMUNITIES TO GET OUT AND GET ACTIVE .....	13
NAVIGATING A COMPLEX HEALTHCARE SYSTEM .....	16
Additional Resources .....	18
Credits .....	19

# Letter from Filmmaker

## Eric D. Seals



When I started filming what is now *Bike Vessel*, it was nothing more than capturing some home video. My father, Donnie, challenged my wife to a game of tennis. Within an hour, we realized he was far too out of shape to compete properly. The day wasn't unique, and there was no further plan to create a story or even make a film. I was simply recording my family on my phone. But when I showed the footage to my dad, something miraculous took place.

I'll never forget that moment. While he doesn't easily show his emotions, I could see the shame and anger that overtook him as he watched. It was at this moment that he realized just how out of shape he had grown—and what that meant for his life. The next day, he purchased a bike, determined to make a change.

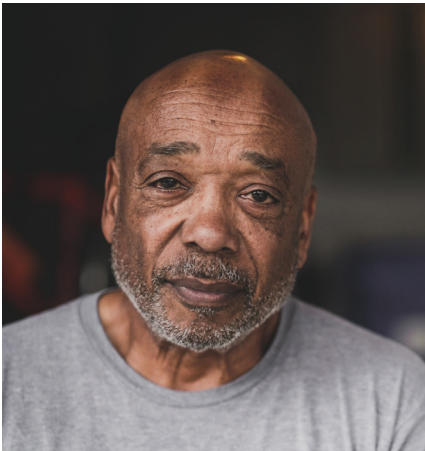
Even though my dad had already had three quadruple heart bypass surgeries, it was seeing himself perform so poorly on the court that ignited the desire for change. That is the power of film.

I decided to film his progress over the next few months. Prior to the tennis match with my wife, we had never discussed his health issues. With each story he shared, I wanted to know more and go deeper. This film became the catalyst for a new stage of my relationship with my dad, one filled with never-before-had conversations and, ultimately, deeper connection. The more we filmed, the more I realized his cautionary tales were more than reflections—he was giving me the blueprint to a healthy, long life. I created this film to share this blueprint with the rest of my community, especially with other Black men because we also deserve to grow old. I want them to witness the power of self-determination, support, exercise, and love.

—Eric D. Seals, Director, *Bike Vessel*

## Letter from Film Participant

### Donnie Seals, Sr.



When I saw myself on that video, I was embarrassed because I used to play competitive tennis. Once I watched Eric's video, I thought, oh sh\*t, I can't continue like this. This may sound extreme, but I felt like I'd hit rock bottom. At the time I was just turning 65.

The medical industry likes to make people believe that you'll need blood pressure medication for the rest of your life. Well, I'm a living witness that that's not true. I'm not on blood pressure meds anymore, and I was once on three.

At 72, I am picking up yet another hobby: pickleball. The oldest guys on my team are 75 and 76. Similar to them, I want to continue to learn new things for as long as I am alive. I believe if anything stops growing, it's dying. I have to grow. And I'm growing in my cycling as well as with my pickleball. I relax by playing Sudoku.

What would I tell someone about the journey? Basically that it is a journey and that the journey is the destination. This journey is now my medication. This is what's keeping me alive. My advice to you is to find your vessel. Mine was a bicycle. Yours can be line dancing, bowling, walking—anything to get you moving. You never know, it could save your life.

—Donnie Seals, Sr., a central film participant in *Bike Vessel*





## About the Film

### FILM SYNOPSIS

Knowing his dad miraculously recovered from three open-heart surgeries after discovering a passion for cycling, filmmaker Eric D. Seals proposes an ambitious idea: Bike together from St. Louis to Chicago. 350 miles. 4 days. On their journey, the two push each other as they find a deeper connection and a renewed appreciation of their quests for their own health and to reimagine Black health.

### SCREENING GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Black men are dying at alarming rates, with complications of the heart being the leading cause of death in Black men older than 44.<sup>1</sup> Efforts to eliminate the racial and ethnic inequities within our healthcare system have often overlooked Black men, whose life expectancy rates have continued to lag far behind Black women and white Americans.<sup>2</sup> A film and impact campaign showcasing the inadequacies in the U.S. healthcare system when it comes to Black men is crucial and time sensitive. The *Bike Vessel* impact campaign aims to encourage communities to take the first step in a healthy lifestyle change while offering the necessary resources and giving the already health-conscious a space to exercise, learn more, and enjoy fellowship.

<sup>1</sup> [Health of Black/African American Population](#) retrieved September 30, 2024

<sup>2</sup> [Overlooked and Underserved: Improving the Health of Men of Color](#) retrieved September 30, 2024

The impact campaign has five primary goals:

1. To encourage communities to get out and get active—even to take just the first step in a lifestyle change, whatever that means for them
2. To equip people with the resources and confidence they need to take control of their health
3. To build and foster community so our audiences aren't alone on their journey
4. To shine a light on the health disparities in Black communities
5. To inform and educate our communities on how to navigate a complex and racist healthcare system

## THEMES TO EXPLORE:

*“As I contemplated the purpose of the impact campaign for Bike Vessel, I reflected on some of the comments I’ve heard while working on the project. Many Black men have expressed that cycling is too expensive and they cannot afford it. Through this campaign, I hope to show Black men that becoming a cyclist doesn’t require a lot of money. Moreover, I’m eager to share my father’s story. He is not a professional athlete or nutritionist, but someone who wanted to make a change in his life.”*

—ERIC D. SEALS, DIRECTOR, *BIKE VESSEL*

- The role class and race play in health disparities
- The cost of medical care in the United States
- The Black community’s relationship to healthcare systems
- Becoming your own health advocate
- The relationship between heart disease, life expectancy, and being active as the only remedy
- Familial relationships and how our individual health impacts our entire family
- Cycling and healing in community





## Discussing the Film

### FRAMING THE CONVERSATION

Health, exercise, and lifestyle choices can be difficult topics to explore for many people. Our society often blames individuals for their personal lifestyle choices while failing to recognize the structures and systems that cause them. In a country without universal health care or equal access to healthy food, water, and other basic necessities, healthy life choices aren't always the most accessible option for some. We hope these conversations are motivating, informative, and encouraging. It isn't our intention to shame or guilt people into healthier lifestyles, as it is impossible to know the intricacies of the lives of others. We're here to offer community and resources for when people are ready to start their journeys and to show them that it is possible.

Here are some tips for navigating these sensitive topics:

- Be mindful of language choice and social stigmas.
- Meet people where they are.
- Work with the group to establish a list of community agreements.
- Avoid diagnosing or giving advice if you are not a medical professional.
- Ask people to use "I" statements and speak from their own experiences.
- Invite medical and health professionals to your event who can advise, who know systems, and who have access to relevant resources.
- Be sure to shape a conversation that is inclusive of all communities.

- Avoid ableist language and steer clear of making assumptions about anyone's health or ability to do a certain exercise, such as cycling or walking.
- Create a conversation that is free of medical jargon and easily understood by event attendees.

## More than Cycling

While Donnie and Eric chose cycling as their exercise of choice, that will not be the best or most accessible option for a lot of people. Our goal is to be an advocate for any and all types of movement such as simply being in nature, walking, weight lifting, skateboarding, and anything else that gets you active! Encourage people to choose an activity that suits their needs and body.

## The Barrier of Entry

The fitness community can be quite intimidating and often inaccessible to your average person. Cycling can be an expensive sport, but it doesn't have to be. Uplift resources where people can access affordable bikes that get the job done regardless of price!

## STARTING THE CONVERSATION

You may want to give attendees a few moments of quiet reflection when the film ends. As you get into the discussion, start with general questions, an approach that helps audiences feel comfortable and allows for relationship building before tackling tougher topics together.

Here are some general questions to pose after reflection:

- What words would you use to describe the film's ending?
- If you were going to tell a friend about this film, what would you say?
- What was your favorite moment of the film? Why?
- Which person in the film do you relate to the most?
- What are you inspired to do after watching this film?
- How does this film leave you feeling?
- What parts will stick with you when you leave here today?
- Is there anything you are hoping to learn more about during our time together?





## Topics and Themes

### UNDERSTANDING HEALTH DISPARITIES IN BLACK COMMUNITIES

#### The role class and race play in health disparities

Health disparities exist across social identities and are determined by a myriad of factors. However, much like the film, this discussion will focus on the intersection of being Black, poor, and/or working class in America as disparities based on race and ethnicity continue to be the most persistent and difficult to address based on existing research. A study by Harvard University's School of Public Health found that factors such as residential segregation and racial discrimination can negatively impact health.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> [Discrimination and Racial Disparities in Health: Evidence and Needed Research](#) retrieved October 2, 2024

America's health system is a microcosm of the institutional and systemic anti-Black racism that exists in the country.<sup>4</sup> Examining the significant health disparities in Black, poor, and working class communities reveals the intersectionality of the key issues examined in *Bike Vessel*: class, race, place, and health. The term *intersectionality* refers to when different social identities interact to create unique experiences of discrimination, domination, and oppression. The term was coined in 1979 by American Civil Rights advocate and scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw.<sup>5</sup> A 2017 report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine concluded that the inequitable distribution of power and resources across lines of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, gender expression, and other dimensions of individual and group identity as one of the root causes of health inequity.<sup>6</sup>

Being Black and poor creates a vastly different health outcome than being white and poor in America. Many poor and working-class white people live in areas with access to shared resources like safe parks, whereas Black poor Americans tend to live in areas of concentrated poverty, which impacts their ability to be outdoors and active.<sup>6</sup>

*"I think the distrust now comes from the inability to deliver high quality healthcare services to everybody equitably.... When we die seven years younger than any other racial group, including Black women.... you aren't going to trust the system that produces those outcomes."*

—DR. STANLEY K. FRENCHER JR., IN *BIKE VESSEL*

## The Black community's relationship to healthcare systems

From therapeutic procedures to medical interventions, Black people are less likely to receive medical attention than white people. Studies have determined that race impacts not only the quality of medical care but also the intensity of one's medical care.<sup>7</sup> Many studies across disciplines have concluded that this pattern is determined by the negative stereotypes a majority of American health providers hold about their Black patients.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond the external discrimination Black people experience from healthcare providers, other studies have shown the experience of racism and discrimination itself creates internal stressors that lead to changes in neuroendocrine, autonomic, and immune systems, leading to poorer health outcomes. The stress from experiencing racism and discrimination changes a person's brain structure and functionality.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> [Systemic racism and U.S. health care](#) retrieved November 22, 2024

<sup>5</sup> [Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics](#) retrieved October 5, 2024

<sup>6</sup> [Communities in Action: Pathways to Health Equity. Washington \(DC\): The Root Causes of Health Inequity](#) retrieved October 29, 2024

<sup>7</sup> [Unequal Treatment: Confronting Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health Care](#) retrieved October 15, 2024

<sup>8</sup> [Discrimination and Racial Disparities in Health: Evidence and Needed Research](#) retrieved October 2, 2024

<sup>9</sup> [Racism, Inequality, and Health Care for African Americans](#) retrieved October 15, 2024



## The cost of medical care in the United States

Conditions such as diabetes and heart disease are some of the most expensive to treat, and they are both most prevalent in Black communities.<sup>10</sup> Factors such as lack of access to healthcare facilities and insurance prevent Black people from accessing the preventive care that substantially reduces the need for high-cost medical treatment.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, the lack of universal health care in a country that has some of the highest pharmaceutical prices in the world exacerbates the health disparities we see in the Black community.

### Discussion Questions

- How does class, race, and history impact your family or your community today?
- What are some ways that race, class, and history intersect in Donnie Sr.'s journey?
- What are some ways that where you live can impact your health outcomes?
- The film brings us into Donnie Sr.'s work life at IBM and the stress he was under in his role. In what ways did being the only Black person on his team and in the entire office increase that stress?
- What are some different ways that work impacts health and wellness?
- How might someone's high school graduation status impact their life expectancy?
- What are some ways that going to a new healthcare provider might be stressful for a Black person or other person of color?
- How might one family member's medical condition impact the entire family financially and emotionally?

<sup>10</sup> [The Economic Impact of Chronic Diseases in Terms of Healthcare Costs and Lost Productivity](#) retrieved October 20, 2024

<sup>11</sup> [Cardiovascular Diseases in African Americans: Fostering Community Partnerships to Stem the Tide](#) retrieved October 20, 2024



*"We cannot create what we  
can't imagine."*

—LUCILLE CLIFTON, POET

## Engagement Activities beyond a Panel

- **Envision a Dream Budget for the People:** In this activity, you will organize a mock town budget meeting at which audience members get to reallocate the real numbers from their town's existing budget toward programs and services that might begin to eliminate some of the inequities that bring about so many of our health disparities. Get creative and dream of programs that might not exist yet; imagine the world you want and make a budget that is accountable to that vision. What resources would your community have in this new reality? What do the homes look like? What about the schools and hospitals?
- **Schedule a preventive appointment:** Whether it's getting a dental cleaning or going to a free community yoga class, commit to doing something that is an investment in your future self.

## Potential Partners and/or Speakers

- Black medical professionals
- People with experience navigating the healthcare system, such as a long-term patient





## ENCOURAGING COMMUNITIES TO GET OUT AND GET ACTIVE

### Understanding Cardiovascular Disease

Heart disease, principally ischemic heart disease and stroke, is the leading cause of death globally. Cardiovascular disease (CVD) causes approximately 780,000 deaths per year in the United States, with the majority being Black Americans. Addressing this epidemic is difficult, as it requires America to also address the social inequalities that determine who gets heart disease and who doesn't. The risk factors associated with heart disease are age, gender, family history, diet, physical activity, tobacco and alcohol use, and whether one is obese or has diabetes.<sup>12</sup> Studies suggest the increased risk for heart disease among Black people is mediated by the concentrated poverty in Black communities, limiting access to healthy life options that can prevent CVD.<sup>13</sup>

### Food and Culture

The food traditions prevalent in Black communities are deeply rooted in America's legacy of slavery. While remarkable, delicious, and creative dishes were created from the scraps discarded by white slave owners, the options presented weren't always the most nutritious. Today, millions of Black families hold onto these recipes and traditions despite the impacts they may have on their overall health. Beyond its nutritional value, food has long been central to social gatherings in Black communities, with weekly or monthly family dinners strengthening bonds and building community. Yet those cultural dietary traditions have been linked to higher levels of hypertension, heart disease, and diabetes in Black communities across the United States.<sup>14</sup>

*“None of the procedures we do actually reverse [heart disease]. We can make the blood pressure number better, but that doesn't mean the blood pressure has gone away.”*

—DR. TERRY MASON, IN *BIKE VESSEL*

*“At the core of all of those diseases is food.”*

—DR. TERRY MASON, IN *BIKE VESSEL*

<sup>12</sup> [How Do Urban African Americans and Latinos View the Influence of Diet on Hypertension?](#) retrieved November 20, 2024

<sup>13</sup> [NIH Heart Disease in Black Americans Fact Sheet](#) retrieved October 2024

<sup>14</sup> [How Do Urban African Americans and Latinos View the Influence of Diet on Hypertension?](#) retrieved October, 2024

*“I wanted something bigger than food. I wanted him.”*

—SHARON SEALS, IN *BIKE VESSEL*, ON CHANGING HER DIET TO HELP SAVE THE LIFE OF DONNIE SR.

*“The quality of life I am having now is so much better than what I was having 20 years ago. I’m finding that ... the best thing you can do is stop eating all of this processed food and all this sh\*t, man.”*

—DONNIE SEALS, SR., IN *BIKE VESSEL*

## Familial relationships and how our individual health impacts our entire family

Our support networks are integral to successful lifestyle changes. Family members influence each other’s life choices and patterns whether they intend to or not simply due to the proximity of their lives. One family member’s eating habits can impact the entire family and can encourage less nutritious diet choices. Donnie Sr. wouldn’t have been able to make a complete lifestyle change without the support of his wife and children. His success and survival required everyone’s complete buy-in.

## Being active & healing in community

Donnie Sr. went from over 20 daily medications to virtually none after making two simple, yet major lifestyle changes: starting to ride a bike and changing his diet. The film discusses the fact that there is no medication that can reverse or cure heart disease. Yet we witness Donnie Sr. make a miraculous recovery—not from his 20 pills, but from the combination of physical movement and clean eating. Other positive outcomes of his cycling: He encouraged his youngest son, Eric, to join in, deepening their bond and also building a new community. Donnie’s healthy choices created a domino effect, influencing and inspiring those around him simply with his changed behavior.

## Discussion Questions

- What are some creative ways families can prioritize health while also continuing family traditions?
- In *Bike Vessel*, we see how extended family members initially responded negatively to the Seals’ family’s new diet that called for them to part ways with delectable Black dishes they’d consumed their entire lives. What are some ways we could be supportive of a family member’s new diet, especially around holidays?
- What do you notice about the risk factors associated with heart disease?
- What are some creative ways to move the body and be more active on a daily basis?
- What are some cultural dishes we enjoy but aren’t good for us? Do you have any healthy alternatives/unique recipes that you would like to share?



## Engagement Activities Beyond a Panel

- Invite a vegan or health-conscious Black chef to do a cooking demo for the audience and share recipes for yummy nutritious treats.
- Invite recreation and outdoor clubs/groups to table and share information on how audiences can get involved.
- Partner with existing bike clubs and organizations to host unique “Bike with *Bike Vessel*” screenings that end with a group cycle ride. To encourage new riders, invite cycling brands on site to educate, lend their bikes, and teach new cyclists how they can get involved in changing their health. Shorter, lower effort rides will encourage and welcome newer riders and people who are being reintroduced to cycling. Check out this [list of Black cycling organizations and businesses](#).
- Encourage your audience to schedule an outdoor hang with a neighbor, friend, or family member or maybe with a new friend from the event. The idea is to go on a short walk, take a bike ride, or engage in some other outdoor adventure. Check out those trails or the new dog park near where you live!
- As part of your event, plan a neighborhood walk for the audience to participate in immediately after the discussion.
- Interview a family elder. Have participants write down five questions to ask a family member about themselves, their family tree, where they come from, and so on. Record the interview for the family archive!

## Potential Partners and/or Speakers

- Vegan or health-conscious Black or minority chefs
- Black bike clubs and cyclists
- Local 5k or marathon sponsors to encourage people to sign up
- Local health organizations, community health clinics, and other organizations that encourage people to get active



## NAVIGATING A COMPLEX HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

Becoming your own health advocate starts with taking responsibility for your health journey and looks like making decisions with the resources given. Utilize available resources and make decisions that prioritize your health. Living a full and healthy life should be an irrevocable civil liberty afforded to every person.

Following are some tips on how to become your own health advocate:

- **Educate yourself.** Learn your family health history if you have access to that information, and familiarize yourself with health conditions for which your community and demographic are at higher risk. Make sure your sources for medical information are reputable. Ask your doctor for suggestions on where to find reliable information on your diagnosis.
- **Take your time when finding a primary care provider.** Don't hesitate to switch providers if something feels off or if you feel you aren't being heard. Your doctor should make you feel safe and comfortable to ask questions and share information. Write your questions down prior to appointments so you don't forget.



- **Get an accountability partner!** Join a fitness group or share health goals with close friends and family who can hold you accountable to your goals.
- **Maximize your healthcare benefits.** If you are privileged enough to have health insurance, look into the details of your coverage to maximize your benefit. Some plans include reimbursement for things like joining a local gym or even buying a bicycle. If your plan covers preventive care, stay up to date with all appointments and checkups.
- **Keep a health journal.** Track your health patterns and share data with your doctor. Regularly checking blood pressure, heart rate, and other health metrics can help identify negative systems even earlier.

## Discussion Questions

- Share a time that you were your own advocate.
- What are some health apps and gadgets that people should know about?
- What benefits came from Donnie Sr. joining a bike group? How would his experience be different if he cycled alone?

*“He’s intuitive with his body, and he said, ‘Something is not right,’ and when he complained to his doctor about that, he gave him some flip answer.”*

—SHARON SEALS, IN *BIKE VESSEL*



## Additional Resources

Check out [Radical Adventure Riders'](#) list of Black cycling organizations and businesses. After watching the film, audience members may be interested in joining a cycling group or purchasing a bike. Make that opportunity available to them by inviting local cycling groups to sign people up for their next ride at your event and by inviting local bike shops to show their wares.

[Foodtank: The Think Tank for Food](#) lists 24 organizations that are using education and community collaboration platforms to advocate for communities' rights to healthy, culturally appropriate, and resilient food systems.



# Credits

## WRITER

**Resita Cox**

## COPY EDITOR

**Joan D. Saunders**

## GUIDE DESIGNER

**Michael Silva**

## INDIE LENS POP-UP TEAM

**Kristy Chin**

Senior Manager,  
Engagement & Impact

**Zoe Stahl**

Associate Manager,  
Engagement & Impact

**Beatriz Castillo**

Senior Director,  
Engagement Operations

**Stu Nolan**

Coordinator,  
Engagement & Impact

## ADVISORS

**Eric D. Seals**

Director, *Bike Vessel*

## INDIE LENS POP-UP

Indie Lens Pop-Up is a neighborhood series that brings people together—virtually and in-person—for film screenings and community-driven conversations. Featuring documentaries seen on PBS's *Independent Lens*, Indie Lens Pop-Up draws local residents, leaders, and organizations to discuss what matters most, from newsworthy topics and social issues to family and community relationships. Since its inception in 2005, more than 7,200 Indie Lens Pop-Up events have brought an estimated 430,000 participants together to discuss issues that impact local communities. For more information, visit the [Indie Lens Pop-Up website](#).

## INDEPENDENT LENS

*Independent Lens* is an Emmy® Award-winning PBS documentary series. With founding executive producer Lois Vossen, the series has been honored with 10 Academy Award nominations and features documentaries united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement, and unflinching visions of independent filmmakers. Presented by ITVS, *Independent Lens* is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Acton Family Giving, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Ford Foundation, Park Foundation, Wyncote Foundation, and National Endowment for the Arts. Stream anytime on the PBS app. For more information, visit the [Independent Lens website](#).

Join the conversation with #IndieLens on Facebook and Instagram at @IndependentLens.

## ITVS

Independent Television Services (ITVS) is the largest co-producer of independent documentaries in the United States. For more than 30 years the San Francisco non-profit has funded and partnered with documentary filmmakers to produce and distribute untold stories. ITVS incubates and co-produces these award-winning titles and premieres them on our Emmy® Award-winning PBS series, *Independent Lens*. ITVS titles appear on PBS, WORLD, NETA, and can be streamed on various digital platforms including the PBS app. ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Acton Family Giving, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Ford Foundation, Wyncote Foundation. For more information, visit the [ITVS website](#).

## CORPORATION FOR PUBLIC BROADCASTING

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