

# Preface



Orlando Bagwell, Executive Producer  
*Matters of Race*

My mother is a beautiful woman. In times of crisis as a child, I remember looking up at her knowing she had the answers to questions I found so hard for my young mind to grasp. Her words would always relax the moment's pain and confusion when once again I was reminded that my brown skin, woolly hair, and full lips made me different to my classmates at my Irish Catholic grade school. Her voice, always gentle but firm, would say, "we're all just human-beings, we're all equal," but she never said, "race didn't matter."

I share this story because in *Matters of Race* we tried to show, through the stories of everyday people from Hawaii to New York, from South Dakota to North Carolina, that race is something we all live with everyday. It is a real part of our lives that keeps us guessing. "Is it race or is it me?" "Was that an insult because of who I am or just because...?" We might not be aware of it everyday but it only takes a look, a word, an inappropriate action, or an overt denial of basic rights or privileges to make race present, felt, and therefore real.

In *Matters of Race*, we seek to explore our separate, as well as shared, past and present. In these stories of our individual and collective lives we see people grappling with race and its meaning in American society. Through these various narratives, we begin to learn about shared experience. And while that which keeps us together can be the burden of the past, that which unites us is also the challenge and the promise of mutual respect, which we gain through knowledge and the greater appreciation for our differences. The films challenge us to find a way to not just tolerate difference, but respect it.

Our nation is a nation of many different cultures, and many different peoples wearing many different colors. While we strive to be a nation of people united with a common purpose, ideals and destiny, we are still a people who come from many places from around the world. We all strive to preserve some of the things that uniquely connect us to those far and varied places of origin. Whether a recent immigrant, native descendent or one who came by force or by choice, we all live here today cherishing our right to express our identity and ourselves as we choose. Our promise to protect and allow difference is what draws many to our shores. But the critical question that writer John Edgar Wideman challenges us to consider in *Matters of Race* is, "If we are different, who determines the meaning of difference, who benefits from its meaning? Who shall create its form and who will benefit from it?"

It is not an easy task but it is imperative to consider race as something more than historical fact or a moment of crisis. I would like to thank Facing History and Ourselves for taking on this challenge and creating this educational curriculum for our nation's teachers to help you engage students in a discussion of race in their everyday lives. I would also like to acknowledge and thank the Nathan Cummings Foundation whose generous support funded this educational project.

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