

# BEHIND EVERY PROMISE

## Discussion Guide

### ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Being a teenager in school is hard enough. In addition to peer pressure to “fit in,” students face tremendous pressure from parents and teachers to do well and succeed. But for young black men, the challenges are even greater, as they are faced with teachers and school systems ill-equipped to help them manage the emotional impact and real-life repercussions of the unintentional biases and stereotypes they face daily.

This guide is designed to support productive conversations among young black men around “Behind Every Promise,” a half-hour video adapted from the documentary film *American Promise*, by Michèle Stephenson and Joe Brewster. With direct testimonials from Idris Brewster and Seun Summers, interwoven with scenes from the feature-length documentary, “Behind Every Promise” gives viewers intimate access to the perspectives of two young black men as they come of age in the American school system.

Young leaders, youth serving organizations, educators, guidance counselors and/or church leaders can use “Behind Every Promise” and this guide to inspire young black men to:

- **Deepen understanding about implicit bias and stereotypes** by relating personal experiences to shared systemic concerns
- **Build peer social support and seek out other support systems** that can contribute to academic success and emotional well-being
- **Strengthen dialogue and agency** around productively dealing with tough choices, hardship and stereotypes

### ABOUT “BEHIND EVERY PROMISE”

“Behind Every Promise” takes a behind-the-scenes look at the award-winning documentary *American Promise*, which explores the very personal journeys of two families preparing their sons for success. Supplementing select scenes from the film with newly shot video testimonials from Idris Brewster and Seun Summers, this retrospective offers viewers a chance to walk in the shoes of the two young men as they navigate the emotional ups and downs of school, friendship and family. From one scene to the next, they dig into what it’s like to grow up black in America—from Idris getting criticized for “talking like a white boy” when he is not among peers at the predominantly white Dalton School in New York’s Upper East Side, to Seun dropping out to attend the predominantly black Benjamin Banneker Academy in Brooklyn. In this thought-provoking video, Idris and Seun tell the *American Promise* story in their own words. To learn more, visit: [www.americanpromise.org](http://www.americanpromise.org)

### OVERVIEW

This discussion guide is intended to help young black men (between the ages of 14 and 22) use “Behind Every Promise” as a springboard for exploring issues around identity and life experience, ultimately inspiring a sense of agency toward developing support systems for success. Whether you are a young and motivated community leader who would like to use “Behind Every Promise” to prompt discussion among your peers, or if you are an adult mentor who wants to motivate young people, this video can help you realize your goals.

### IN THIS GUIDE, YOU’LL FIND:

- 2 Getting Started
- 2-3 Facilitation Tips
- 3-4 Discussion Questions
- 5 Take Action
- 6 Resources
- 7 Logistics Checklist
- 8 Acknowledgements

## GETTING STARTED

“Behind Every Promise” can be used in a variety of contexts, from a small group dialogue to a large public event. Consider using it:

- In leadership trainings
- To support peer mentorship efforts
- To prompt dialogue in a peer support group
- As the centerpiece of a community event
- To kick-off a youth-led panel discussion

Whatever you do, be sure to plan ahead. Here are the basics you should keep in mind:

- Do you have a room that you can use with the proper equipment (laptop, high-speed internet and speakers with the appropriate adaptors)?
- Think ahead about how much time you’ll need for your screening. It could take you anywhere from one hour to over two, depending on your discussion, activities, etc. For example:
  1. Setting up the room (table, chairs, A/V): 15-20 min.
  2. Showing the film: 30 minutes
  3. Discussion: 30-60 minutes
  4. Clean-up: 15-20 minutes
- When scheduling with the group, pick a convenient location and time to ensure everyone who wants to participate, can. For help thinking through basic technical logistics, take a look at our Logistics Checklist on page 7.
- Look through the discussion questions (on pp.3-4) ahead of time so you have an idea of the types of questions you think are most relevant to your group and the length of time you have.

## FACILITATION TIPS

By providing first-hand perspectives of two young black men growing up in America, “Behind Every Promise” raises themes related to structural injustice, implicit bias and other forms of systemic inequity. Be prepared to facilitate a conversation that helps participants make those connections and avoids placing the burden of responsibility for success solely on young black men.

Discussions around “Behind Every Promise” may raise some personal sensitivities and even potential conflict or disagreement among participants. People process information and relate it to their own experiences differently, so be prepared for emotionally charged conversations. The following section provides some broad guidelines to help you host a productive conversation.

### TIP

For more formal group gatherings, or if there has recently been a serious incident in your community, it’s a good idea to invite an experienced facilitator to help you. Contact a local youth serving organization for advice.

## SETTING GUIDELINES

Before delving into intimate conversations, it is important to establish guidelines and create a “safe space” where participants trust each other enough to share their experiences. Consider some of the following guidelines:

- **Keep it in the room:** These experiences are personal; what is discussed in the room is confidential and will not leave the room.
- **One mic:** One person speaks at a time.
- **“I” statements:** Speak from your own experience as much as possible and lead statements with, “I think,” “I feel” or “I believe.”
- **No wrong answers:** Most of these questions are geared towards personal reflection and story sharing. Your experiences and your perspectives are always correct!
- **Share what you can:** Share as much or as little as you want. Don’t feel like you have to answer every question if you’re not ready.
- **Step up, step back:** If you are a quieter person, feel empowered to share your experiences, and if you speak a lot, step back so others have a chance to speak.
- **Give them a boost:** Be positive when others offer their ideas—it takes courage to share. So use your power to encourage your peers!



## TIP

Write down the discussion guidelines on a white board or flip-chart to make sure everyone, including the facilitator, sticks to them!

## ENSURING PARTICIPATION

Even if you've never facilitated a conversation before, there are some easy things you can do to help everyone feel comfortable participating in the conversation:

- **Share your enthusiasm:** Lively facilitation keeps participants engaged. Conveying your own passion, energy and commitment is the best way to ensure others feel it too.
- **Make eye contact:** Look at participants when they speak.
- **Promote active listening:** Ask a participant who is speaking to speak up if you notice others are distracted. Use prompts such as, "Did everyone hear that? Can you repeat that to the speaker?"
- **Engage the speaker:** Make sure that participants respond to each other's comments. For example, "What did you think about what he said?" or "Do you agree with what she said?"
- **Deepen understanding:** Check to see if you understand the meaning of a participant's statements by reflecting back to them a summary of the main points that you think he was making. This helps clarify that you understand while ensuring that other participants understand as well.

## CONNECTING THE DOTS

- What support systems do you rely on outside of family or caregivers? Identify 2-3 that help you deal with tough choices and hardship in a productive way, and share them with the group. Explain how they support you.
- Consider your neighborhood and other public spaces that you frequent. Which ones support your academic success and which ones get in the way? Please explain.
- If you could give advice about how communities can better support the success and emotional well-being of black males, what advice would you give?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Feel free to pick and choose the questions that are most interesting and relevant to you and your group. No matter what, it's a good idea to open up the conversation with "Getting the Conversation Started," to allow for viewers to get warmed up for discussion. "Getting Into It" helps participants make the connection between key moments in the video and their personal experiences. "Connecting the Dots" should be used to help participants make connection to related issues not directly addressed in the video. There are also "Bonus Questions" that add new information to deepen the discussion.

## GETTING THE CONVERSATION STARTED

- Was there a particular moment or scene that really jumped out at you? Which one, and why?
- Does this story relate to your own life, or to your family and friends? Please explain.

## GETTING INTO IT

1. Idris and Seun both began their educational experiences at Dalton, an predominantly white school. In one scene, Seun talks about being one of the very few black students at the school and what it is like to be seen as a stereotypical black kid. “People treated me different,” he explains. Do you relate to that experience? Please explain.
2. What kinds of things did Idris and Seun each do to deal with their feelings of being treated differently from others? Have you ever felt like people treated you differently from other people and if so, what did you do about it?
3. Idris and Seun were under many social pressures, some of which made Seun feel like he wasn’t “smart enough.” Do you ever feel that way? If so, what kinds of pressures are you under that lead you to feel inadequate? What strategies do you use to address these feelings in a productive?
4. In one scene, Idris worries it will be embarrassing to play on the junior varsity basketball team after playing on the varsity team. It is especially hard for him because he thinks basketball is one of the only things he’s good at. Why do you think he feels this way? When he says he is “expected to be good at sports,” who do you think expects it?
5. Idris reflects on how long it sometimes takes for him and his friends to catch a cab. How does Idris make sense of the experience? Have you ever had a hard time figuring out if a difficult experience you had was because of your race or if it was something else? Please explain.
6. Seun talks about the valuable lessons he learned from his karate instructor. Do you have any mentors or someone in your life whom you look up to? Who is it and what valuable advice have you learned from him/her? Please explain.
7. In one scene, Seun’s younger brother dies in an accident. After that he starts to slip at school and in general. What kind of support did Seun receive that helped him get through this difficult time? Have you ever lost someone close to you? How did you work through that experience? Who or where did you turn to for support?
8. Idris describes kids at Dalton who “in theory had everything.” But he says he values his family more because they don’t simply “throw money at him.” Why do you think this is important to him? Please explain.
9. Idris and Seun both have younger siblings. Seun explains that, for him, he feels he “has a responsibility as an older brother.” What do you think he means? Do you feel like you have a responsibility to your family? To your community? Why or why not? Please explain.
10. Looking back on his high school journey, Seun says he had a tough time. But sometimes, he continues, he was the one who made it tough for himself. What do you think he means? In what ways is your school experience tough for reasons you can’t control and in what ways is it tough for reasons that you can control? Please explain.
11. Idris and Seun have been through a lot, but we see each of them coming into themselves as they navigate different challenges. What experiences have helped you to come to understand yourself better? What have you learned through the process? In one scene, Seun says that when people believe in you, it makes you think you can succeed too. Who seems to believe in Seun? What or who in your life helps you to feel like you can succeed? How do they do it?

## BONUS QUESTION

According to a study conducted by the University of California Los Angeles Civil Rights Project, 1 in 4 African-American students in secondary schools across the U.S. is suspended compared to 1 in 16 white students. The vast majority of these suspensions are for minor infractions such as tardiness and dress code violations rather than for serious or criminal behavior. And yet, if a student is suspended, they are twice as likely to drop out, significantly contributing to their chances of ending up in juvenile detention.

In your opinion, why are black males more likely to be suspended? Do you have suggestions for more productive approaches to school discipline? What are they?

## BONUS QUESTION

According to the National Resource Center on ADHD, boys are more than 2 times as likely as girls to get diagnosed with ADHD and a slightly higher percentage of black youth are diagnosed with ADHD than white youth. While a February 2013 study found those rates are increasing dramatically, there is disagreement among researchers about the role that race plays in ADHD diagnoses. And there is additional debate about whether some people who are empowered to diagnose for ADHD are in fact qualified to do so.

In your opinion, how can a person determine the extent to which they legitimately have ADHD and the extent to which other factors are contributing to their diagnosis? Please explain.

12. In one scene, Seun says that when people believe in you, it makes you think you can succeed too. Who seems to believe in Seun? What or who in your life helps you to feel like you can succeed? How do they do it?
13. Idris and Seun’s parents seem to be hard on them sometimes. In one scene, Idris’ dad says he’s not being aggressive enough on the basketball court. What do you think his dad’s afraid of? Do you have adults in your life who are hard on you? If so, what do you think their reasons are for putting pressure on you?
14. At the end of the video, Seun shares his feelings on the importance of selecting “real friends.” What do you think he means by “real friends”? How can you tell if someone is a “real friend” to you or not? Please explain.
15. Why does Idris feel good about going to Occidental College, even though it wasn’t his first choice? What life lessons did he learn from the experience? Do you think that Idris has matured by the end of the video? If so, in what ways and based on what experiences? What skills or life lessons do you think you are carrying into adulthood? What experiences are they based on? Please explain.



## TAKE ACTION

You can maintain the momentum of the screening discussion by taking steps to foster a support system for you and your peers that can lead to your collective success. Here are some ideas:

- **Start a group**, if you haven't already, that meets regularly to share experiences, tips and strategies for productively dealing with tough choices, hardship and stereotypes.
- **Join an existing group**. Check in with local youth serving organizations near you.
- **Find a mentor**. You don't have to do it alone. Contact your local Big Brother, Big Sister or other mentorship group near you. See the end of this guide for suggestions.
- **Become a mentor**. You have experiences and insights to share. Contact your local Big Brothers Big Sisters or other mentorship group near you. See the end of this guide for more suggestions. [BigBrothersBigSisters.org](http://BigBrothersBigSisters.org)
- **Make media**: Visit [The Laundromat Project](http://TheLaundromatProject.org) to learn about *The Power of Perception*, a high school, media-action curriculum and residency designed to empower young people to amplify and affirm their self-worth through truth-telling and media-making. [LaundromatProject.org](http://LaundromatProject.org)
- **Weigh in!** Join the *American Promise* community and share your ideas about what steps people can take to support young men of color. Post your thoughts to:

**Facebook** [@American Promise](https://www.facebook.com/AmericanPromise)

**Twitter**. Tweet to hashtag [#EveryStepCounts](https://twitter.com/EveryStepCounts). Tag [@PromiseFilm](https://twitter.com/PromiseFilm)

**YouTube** if you've created a video. Use the tags: [americanpromise](https://www.youtube.com/hashtag/americanpromise), [everystepcounts](https://www.youtube.com/hashtag/everystepcounts)

**Tumblr, Pinterest, and/or Instagram** if you've got photos or favorite quotes. Tag [@AmericanPromise](https://www.instagram.com/AmericanPromise) and [#EveryStepCounts](https://www.instagram.com/EveryStepCounts)

## RESOURCES

### ABOUT BLACK MALE ACHIEVEMENT

**Achievement Gap Initiative (AGI)** is a university-wide effort initiated by the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) to focus academic research, public education and innovative outreach activities toward eliminating achievement gaps. To learn more, visit: [www.agi.harvard.edu](http://www.agi.harvard.edu)

**NAACP's National Education Program** works to assure an equitable start for all Americans through advocacy training, policy development and guidance, building collaborative networks and direct action. To learn more, visit: [www.naacp.org/programs/entry/education-programs](http://www.naacp.org/programs/entry/education-programs)

**Open Society Foundations' Campaign for Black Male Achievement** aims to address the exclusion of large numbers of black men and boys from economic, social, educational and political life in the United States. To learn more, visit: [www.opensocietyfoundations.org/topics/black-male-achievement](http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/topics/black-male-achievement)

**National Education Association** published a report that summarizes the current research about black male students. To learn more, visit: [www.nea.org/assets/docs/educatingblackboys11rev.pdf](http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/educatingblackboys11rev.pdf)

### ACADEMIC SUPPORT

**National Urban League's Project Ready** helps students in grades 8–12 make academic progress, benefit from cultural enrichment opportunities and develop important skills, attitudes and aptitudes that will aid in their transition from high school and position them for post-secondary success. To find an affiliate near you, visit: [www.iamempowered.com/programs/project-ready/urban-league-affiliates](http://www.iamempowered.com/programs/project-ready/urban-league-affiliates)

**United Negro College Fund** plays a critical role in enabling more than 60,000 students each year to attend college and get the education they need and that the nation needs them to have. To learn more about Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), Scholarships, internships and more, visit: [www.uncf.org](http://www.uncf.org)

**Teaching Tolerance** is a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, dedicated to reducing prejudice, improving intergroup relations and supporting equitable school experiences for our nation's children. Teaching Tolerance created an *American Promise* Educator's Guide. Let your teacher know. To learn more, visit: [www.americanpromise.org/educators](http://www.americanpromise.org/educators)

**Tavis Smiley Foundation** programs focus on helping young people identify the skills, strengths and talents that make them a unique leader and how to apply those skills to become catalysts for positive social change. To learn more about academics, scholarships and activism, visit: [www.youthtoladers.org/teen\\_issues.html](http://www.youthtoladers.org/teen_issues.html)

### COMMUNITY ACTION

**Black Youth Project** efforts are based on three basic concepts: knowledge, voice and action. To find out how you can take action against inequality and injustice, visit: [action.blackyouthproject.com](http://action.blackyouthproject.com)

**Laundromat Project** brings art, artists and arts programming into laundromats and other everyday spaces, amplifying the creativity that already exists within communities to build networks, solve problems and enhance our sense of ownership in the places where we live, work and grow. To learn more, visit: [www.laundromatproject.org](http://www.laundromatproject.org)

### MENTORSHIP

**Mentoring Brothers in Action** is a movement led by **Big Brothers Big Sisters** and the nation's three largest African American fraternities **Alpha Phi Alpha**, **Kappa Alpha Psi** and **Omega Psi Phi** to engage more African American men in fraternal, social, faith-based and professional organizations to get involved in one-to-one mentoring to change the odds for African American boys. To learn more, visit: [www.MentoringBrothers.org](http://www.MentoringBrothers.org)

**100 Black Men of America's** programs are based on a simple principle: through sustained mentoring programs young people realize their potential. To learn more or to find a chapter near you, visit: [www.100blackmen.org](http://www.100blackmen.org)





## LOGISTICS CHECKLIST

Use this checklist to help you think through the basic technical logistics for your screening. Not every piece will be relevant to you, but be sure to look through it to get a sense of the planning process.

### PRELIMINARY PLANNING

4-6 weeks prior

- Book the venue and date for your screening. Make sure the venue has the proper A/V equipment you need (see below).
- For larger public events, recruit local organizations as partners to help you.
- Become a fan of the *American Promise* Facebook page to learn about events and other developments that might apply to your event

### OPTIONAL: SOCIAL MEDIA OUTREACH

2-3 weeks prior

- Reach out to your peers or your group electronically by creating a Facebook event. Consider announcing it on the *American Promise* Facebook page.
- If you don't already have a group formed, create a flyer to recruit participants. Post in places frequently visited by your peers (e.g., school, gym, community center, basketball courts, library).

### FINAL PLANNING

several days prior

- Important:** Make sure there aren't any glitches by double checking the screening venue's bandwidth and watching the link in advance. For example, you may realize you need extra time to fully load the video before it will play without interruption.
- Send a Facebook reminder to your peers. Or send text, email or Tweet to the people who expressed interest.

### AT THE EVENT ITSELF

- Arrive 30 minutes early to leave plenty of time to set up the room.
- Double-check that your audio-visual materials and equipment (like sound) are working.
- Be sure to cue the video up online ahead of time so the video is fully loaded by the time your screening starts.
- Put up signs to direct people from the main entrance to the meeting room, if necessary.
- As people arrive, ask them to sign in so you can stay in touch about future events. (Optional)
- Take photos! (Optional)

### REQUIRED SUPPLIES

- "Behind Every Promise" link
- Computer
- High-speed Internet
- Screen & projector OR high-definition TV with HDMI ports
- Speakers
- Proper adapters and cables

### OPTIONAL SUPPLIES

- Pens/pencils
- Name tags
- Paper and markers to make signs and tape
- Flip-chart and markers
- Refreshments
- Handouts you need for the presentation, such as: discussion questions, guidelines, etc.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“Behind Every Promise” is adapted from the documentary film *American Promise* by Michèle Stephenson and Joe Brewster, and was produced in association with Active Voice.

### Funding for “Behind Every Promise” was provided by

Andrus Family Fund

### Active Voice Staff

Shaady Salehi, Executive Director

Sahar Driver, Program Manager

Jillian Garcia, Technology & Operations Manager

### Rada Film Group

Michèle Stephenson, Producer/Director

Joe Brewster, Producer/Director

Fritz Archer, Editor

Jordan Fong, Editor

Gregory S. Jones, Projects Manager

### Guide Reviewers

Kelly Williams, Big Brothers Big Sisters’ Mentoring Brothers in Action  
Khaleaph Luis, Rada Rilm Group

### Special Thanks

Ri-Karlo Handy of Handyman Pictures, Consulting Producer

Errol Weber, Interviewer/Cinematographer

RYSE Center in Richmond, CA

Youth Uprising in Oakland, CA

ACTIVE  
voice®



**Active Voice** tackles social issues through the creative use of film. We believe that real progress requires real connection, and that film has a unique power to bring people together in meaningful ways. Every day Active Voice helps filmmakers, funders and communities start the conversations and relationships that lead to lasting, measurable change. Since our inception in 2001, Active Voice has influenced local, regional and national dialogue on issues including immigration, criminal justice, healthcare and education. [www.activevoice.net](http://www.activevoice.net)

**Rada Film Group** is a Brooklyn-based media production house operated by husband and wife team, Joe Brewster and Michèle Stephenson. Brewster and Stephenson are award winning filmmakers whose work has been shown on television, cable and in theatrical release on six continents. [www.radafilm.com](http://www.radafilm.com)

© Active Voice 2013