



My Grandfather Patten.

# THE INQUISITOR



The  
Constitution  
OF THE  
UNITED STATES  
OF AMERICA

## ENGAGEMENT GUIDE



Corporation  
for Public  
Broadcasting



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# Letter from the Filmmaker



My films explore how Black women like myself fight to maintain our agency, joy, and imagination, even in the face of suppression. I examine how we navigate the forces that seek to limit our freedom—and how we transform those challenges into power, not just for ourselves, but for our communities.

To explore the rapidly shifting political landscape—one that is only now beginning to reflect the true demographics of our country—I have been working on a trilogy of films about Southern Black women and political power. *The Inquisitor* is the final chapter of this series.

At a time when Americans are both profoundly divided over and deeply unaware of their shared history, Barbara Jordan's story feels more urgent than ever. A powerful Black woman with an unforgettable public voice and a complex private life, she offers us an essential perspective in our national conversation.

Over the five years of making this film, the world has changed dramatically. Democracy feels more fragile than ever, and many people feel lost. Barbara's words stay with me: "What Americans want is simple. They want an America as good as its promise."

How will we get there?

I hope this film serves as both a balm for the times and a roadmap from Barbara in the great beyond. Making this film has kept me grounded through these turbulent years. For our team, it has been more than a project—it has been our purpose. Now, as we release it into the world, we carry forward what Barbara stood for.

We must all be inquisitors for our rights and for those who cannot fight for themselves.

—Angela Tucker, Director/Producer, *The Inquisitor*



## About the Film

### FILM SYNOPSIS

Explore the life and legacy of Barbara Jordan in *The Inquisitor*. Jordan was a groundbreaking Texas congresswoman whose sharp intellect and moral clarity transformed U.S. politics. From Nixon's impeachment to civil rights battles, her voice demanded accountability, while she privately faced struggles few ever knew of.

### SCREENING OBJECTIVES

- Examine the intersection of race, gender, and politics in 20th-century America
- Understand the significance of representation in democratic institutions
- Explore Jordan's philosophy of the Constitution and civic duty
- Inspire civic engagement and political participation
- Discuss the ongoing relevance of Jordan's message about American democracy
- Encourage dialogue about barriers to political participation for marginalized communities



## How To Use This Guide

This discussion guide supports organizations, public libraries, public media organizations, classrooms, and community groups hosting screenings of *The Inquisitor*.

Barbara Jordan was brilliant, groundbreaking, and complex. This guide approaches her with both deep respect and honest acknowledgment that she was human, making strategic choices with real costs.

We examine the politics of respectability, gender, sexuality, race, and excellence as armor—not to diminish Jordan, but to learn from her full humanity. Jordan herself would want us to think critically and wrestle with complexity.

The guide is flexible. You don't need to use every section.

### What's Included:

- Discussion questions organized by four themes
- Facilitator tips for creating an inclusive space and handling difficult moments
- Fully scripted activities
- Resource lists



# Facilitator Tips

## Prepare Yourself Before the Screening

### Understand the Context:

- Familiarize yourself with *The Inquisitor* and themes related to the film.
- **Understand intersectionality** – how race, gender, sexuality, and disability overlapped in Jordan's experience.
- **Prepare for sensitive topics** – This film addresses race, gender, sexuality (Jordan's relationship with Nancy Earl), disability (MS), and political tensions. Participants may have strong reactions. Be ready to hold space for emotion and differing perspectives while keeping the discussion productive.

### Know Your Role:

- Ask questions, but do not provide all the answers.
- Make space for multiple perspectives.
- Help participants connect Jordan's story to their own lives and current events.
- Encourage critical thinking (e.g., Jordan is complex, not perfect).

## Set Ground Rules

- Listen actively and respectfully – Don't interrupt
- Speak from personal experience – Use "I" statements
- Disagree with ideas, not people – Critique arguments, not individuals.
- Step up, step back – If you talk a lot, make space for others; if you're quiet, challenge yourself to share.
- Maintain confidentiality – Personal stories shared here stay here.
- Expect and accept non-closure – We won't resolve everything today, and that's okay.
- One mic, one voice – Only one person speaks at a time.
- Right to pass – You don't have to answer every question.
- Ouch/oops – If someone says something harmful, anyone can say "ouch" to pause and address it.

## Create an Inclusive Space

Before people arrive:

- Ensure physical accessibility (wheelchair access, seating options, temperature).
- Have materials in large print if needed.
- Arrange seating in a circle or U-shape (not rows) for better dialogue.

As people arrive:

- Welcome each person individually.
- Provide name tags if helpful.
- Offer refreshments.

During discussion:

- **Watch for dominant voices**—Gently redirect: *“Let’s hear from folks we haven’t heard from yet.”*
- **Draw out quiet voices**—*“I see you nodding—what are you thinking?”*
- **Acknowledge emotions**—*“I can see this is bringing up strong feelings. Let’s take a breath and ...”*
- **Make space for those most affected**—  
When discussing race, prioritize the voices of people of color; when discussing gender, prioritize women’s voices; and when discussing LGBTQ+ issues, prioritize LGBTQ+ voices.
- **Find commonality**—*“I’m hearing both X and Y. How might both be true?”*

## Remember Words Matter

In discussions of race, gender, sexuality, and disability, language matters. Be explicit about terminology. Ask participants how they identify.

Here are some terms used in this guide:

- **Black/African American**—Used to describe Jordan’s racial identity and the communities she served
- **LGBTQ+**—Jordan never publicly identified as such, but her relationship with Nancy Earl is part of her story
- **Disability/disabled**—Jordan lived with multiple sclerosis and continued her public service while using a wheelchair
- **Constitutional democracy**—Government by the people, limited by a constitution that protects everyone’s rights, regardless who holds the majority of votes in government

## Handle Difficult Moments

If someone makes a factually incorrect statement:

- Don’t embarrass them.
- Gently correct: *“My understanding is [correct info]. Does anyone have other information?”*

If someone expresses a racist, sexist, or homophobic view:

- Don’t ignore it.
- Name it directly, but calmly: *“That statement reflects a stereotype that causes harm. In this space, we ...”*
- Refer back to the ground rules.
- If they persist, speak to them privately during break or ask them to leave.

If the discussion becomes heated:

- Acknowledge the passion: *“These are important issues that people feel strongly about.”*
- Refocus on common ground: *“What do we agree on?”*
- Take a physical break if needed.

If someone shares a painful personal story:

- Thank them for their vulnerability.
- Don’t try to fix or minimize their experience.
- Ask: *“What do others notice about what [name] shared?”*

If the group gets stuck on one topic:

- Acknowledge: *“This is clearly important. We could spend the whole time here.”*
- Redirect: *“Let’s park this and come back if we have time. For now, let’s explore ...”*

## Consider Self-Care as a Facilitator

Facilitating discussions about race, power, identity, and injustice is a form of emotional labor.

- Debrief with a co-facilitator or trusted friend after the event.
- Notice your own reactions and process them.
- Celebrate what went well, learn from what didn’t, and let go of perfection

# Historical Context and Background

## 1936–1959

### Jordan's Early Life and Education

- Barbara Jordan was born on February 21, 1936.
- Jordan grew up in segregated Houston's Fifth Ward to Ben and Arlyne Jordan.
- The Supreme Court made a landmark decision in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case in 1954. This case, among others, opened up political opportunities.
- Jordan received her bachelor's degree in political science and history from Texas Southern University in 1956.
- Jordan received her law degree from Boston University School of Law in 1959.

## 1960–1966

### Jordan's Early Career

- Jordan started her law practice in Houston out of her family's living room and became involved in the Kennedy and Johnson campaigns.
- Jordan had two unsuccessful runs for the Texas House of Representatives in 1962 and 1964.
- Meanwhile, women and women's rights became more prominent and introduced notable contemporaries like Shirley Chisholm and Bella Abzug.
- The Jim Crow Era ended with the passage of landmark cases like The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and The Voting Rights Act of 1965.

## 1967–1972

### Jordan's Term as State Senator

- Jordan became the first Black state senator in Texas since 1883 and the first Black woman to serve in the Texas Senate.
- Congress passed the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) on March 22, 1972, but the states failed to ratify the amendment.
- Jordan met Nancy Early during her term as State Senator.

## 1973–1979

### Jordan's Term in the U.S. House of Representatives

- Jordan became the first Southern Black woman elected to Congress, joining the U.S. House of Representatives. While serving, Jordan was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1973.
- During the Watergate Hearings, Jordan presented her argument about the Constitution as part of the House Judiciary Committee on July 25, 1974. Following the hearings, Nixon became the first U.S. president to resign from office on August 9, 1974.
- Jordan became the first Black woman to be a keynote speaker at the Democratic National Convention in 1976.
- In 1978, Jordan announced she would not seek re-election to Congress.

## 1979–1996

### Jordan's Post-Congressional Career

- In 1979, Jordan returned to Texas and became a professor at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas.
- Jordan became an ethics advisor and chair of the Commission on Immigration Reform to Texas Governor Ann Richards.
- U.S. Congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), meant to prohibit discrimination and ensure accessibility.
- Jordan returned to the Democratic National Convention stage, making her remarks from her wheelchair. In doing so, she raised the visibility of disability on a national stage.

## January 17, 1996

### Death of Barbara Jordan

- Jordan continued speaking publicly while battling multiple sclerosis until her death.
- Barbara Jordan passed away after a battle with leukemia. Jordan became the first Black woman buried in the Texas State Cemetery.

# Topics and Themes

## NAVIGATING RACE, GENDER, AND POWER AT THE PODIUM AND BEYOND

### Discussion Questions

#### Navigating institutional spaces

- How did Jordan's experience seem to differ from her white male counterparts in politics shown onscreen? How did race, gender, and her sexuality influence those differences? In what ways have you seen similar dynamics today?
- In what ways did Jordan show solidarity with people across identities? How would you take from her example to show more solidarity in your community?
- Jordan was often one of the few Black women, in spaces that were traditionally made up of a majority of white men. How did Jordan earn respect and build community in those spaces? How would you apply some of her techniques to your life? And, what would you not apply to your life?
- Where do you see similar dynamics in institutions, schools, or workplaces today?
- Jordan was one of many firsts, including the first Black woman to speak at the Democratic National Convention. Are there areas in your life where you have been "the first"? What was that experience like? How would you want your community to support people who do become one of "the firsts" to accomplish something?
- Jordan chose to keep her relationship private amidst an era that remained legally and culturally hostile to LGBTQ+ people. How did this shape Jordan's decisions? How have expectations of public disclosure changed for LGBTQ+ public figures since Jordan's time?

#### Maintaining balance while pursuing excellence

- Jordan's father motivated her to be excellent. Have you also heard that narrative? Where or how did you hear that narrative? In what ways did excellence protect Jordan? In what ways did it weigh on her?
- In the film, we see Jordan's "multiple worlds," at home—in the kitchen, around music, with friends—and at work—in the Texas Senate, in the U.S. Congress, and at the Democratic National Convention. How did your view of Jordan change after seeing these "multiple worlds"? How does that view compare to how you see other people in positions of power? What "multiple worlds" do you move through in your own life?
- How did Jordan build rest and joy into a high-pressure life? How do you build rest and joy into your life?
- What does Jordan's shift from U.S. representative to teacher tell us about long-term personal sustainability? What practices sustain you in your work or activism?

#### Navigating power and disability

- Jordan's disability changed her public presence in politics—but it did not end her public service. What barriers do disabled leaders still face in political and professional spaces?
- What would it look like to design institutions that assume disability and care as part of leadership, not exceptions to it?
- Jordan hid her disability for most of her life. What factors would cause her to do that?



## ANALYZING DEMOCRACY AND THE CONSTITUTION

*“What the people want is simple.  
They want an America as good as its promise.”*

—Barbara Jordan, 1976 Democratic National Convention

### Discussion Questions

#### The meaning of “We, the People”

- Who was and was not included in “We, the People” in 1787?
- How did people like Jordan fight their way into that “we”?
- Who still struggles to be fully included in “We, the People” today?

#### Jordan’s philosophy on the Constitution and faith in the democratic process

- During the Watergate hearings, Jordan remarks, “My faith in the Constitution is whole; it is complete; it is total.” What are your thoughts on the Constitution? What might it mean to have total faith in a document that once excluded certain groups of people, like Jordan?

#### Jordan’s views on Watergate and Constitutional accountability

- During the Watergate hearings, Jordan used the Constitution to make a call for government accountability. Where do you see a need for accountability today? How can we use the Constitution as a tool for accountability?

#### Patriotism and civic responsibility

- Jordan continuously works within the political system. What are the strengths and limitations of working within the system?
- Jordan wanted to be remembered as a patriot. How do you define a patriot? How does her example challenge or support your idea of what a patriot could be?
- Jordan repeatedly demanded better from her country. Is demanding better from your country an act of love, an act of disloyalty, or something else?
- At the 1976 Democratic National Convention, Jordan said, “What people want is simple. They want an America as good as its promise.” What is America’s promise?
- Jordan also said, “We can do better.” What does “doing better” mean as a country? How can you “do better” to contribute to change?



## WHOSE VOICE AND WHOSE HISTORY

### Discussion Questions

#### Who writes history, and who gets remembered

- How do racism, sexism, and gender roles impact how people's contributions are recognized or forgotten over time? How do you think it shaped how Jordan was remembered?
- Who does history typically remember? Who would you like to see celebrated today? How can your community honor its history, beyond creating monuments?

#### The power of voice

- What parts of Jordan's speeches resonated with you?
- How did her delivery stand out to you?
- What stories still need to be added to the public record?



## TEACHING AS A PUBLIC SERVICE

*“I had the notion that I’d like to do something to affect the way masses of people live.”*

—Barbara Jordan, *The Inquisitor*

### Discussion Questions

#### The value of teachers

- Why did Jordan choose teaching over politics?
- Barbara Jordan called teaching “the most important work.” What are your thoughts on the value of teaching and mentoring?
- Why do you think Jordan chose “teacher” and “patriot” to mark her life, rather than titles like “Congresswoman” or “first Black woman in Congress from the South”? How do those two words capture her work in the classroom? If you could add a third word for her, what would it be?
- What words would you use to define your own life’s work?

#### Call to action—what does Jordan’s story inspire you to do?

- How can you act as both **teacher** (passing on knowledge, building pathways) and **patriot** (holding the country accountable to its promises)?
- Since Jordan’s time, what progress has been made in representation and democratic inclusion? What remains disturbingly familiar in terms of voter suppression, exclusion, and injustice?
- If we took Jordan seriously that “democracy is not a spectator sport,” what would change in our daily lives?
- What specific actions—personal, local, institutional—does Jordan’s example call you to take? What does “the work must always continue” look like in your context?



# Engagement Activities

## WHO'S CARRYING THE TORCH?

Attendees can do this activity as one large group or in small groups. Distribute posterboard to each group. Ask attendees to choose a person who embodies Barbara Jordan's values—holding constitutional faith, breaking barriers, serving with integrity. They can include:

- Elected officials
- Community organizers/activists
- Educators/mentors
- Journalists
- Community members

Attendees can use these as guiding questions:

- What have they done that resonated with you?
- How are they similar to/different from Jordan?
- What can we learn from them?

As the group discusses, create a simple poster that can demonstrate why they chose that person. The poster can include words or images that describe:

- Why did they choose this person
- Their connection to Jordan's legacy
- One quote or key achievement

Feel free to generally encourage attendees to decorate the chart paper with representations of their achievements

Groups can display their posters and do a quick gallery walk, and share what they learned about their person.

Materials: Chart paper, markers, pens, and craft materials for decorating

## “DEAR \_\_\_\_\_” LETTER WRITING

Invite attendees to write letters to people who embody Jordan's spirit.

In the letter, attendees can use these guiding questions:

- How do they exemplify Jordan's work as a patriot and teacher?
- How do they inspire you and your work?

You can ask participants to share an excerpt of their letter or mail it to the people they are writing to.

Materials: Paper, pens, optional envelopes

## GROUP COLLAGE

Attendees can do this activity as one large group or in small groups. Distribute or make available on a table: large-sized poster board, colored paper, a magazine and other crafty materials to each group. If there are multiple groups, share one large-sized poster paper with each small group.

Encourage attendees to make a collective collage together around one of the following prompts:

- *“I am an Inquisitor.”*
- *“What the constitution means to me.”* (You can pull phrases from the Constitution or pull images that come to mind when you think of the Constitution.)
- *“Democracy is not a spectator sport.”*

If in smaller groups, encourage attendees to present their prompt and share what inspired their collages.

Materials: Magazines, colored paper, markers, tape, glue, scissors, poster board, optional print-out of text from the Constitution

## THE POWER OF VOICE

Over the course of her life, Jordan gave impactful speeches across the country. In honor of that legacy, you can make space for more people to share their words with the community.

Before the event, print a few of Jordan’s speeches and lay them out on a table.

After the film, invite attendees to share a poem or thought that relates to themes in the film and Barbara Jordan’s life. Extend an additional invitation for participants to choose to read an excerpt from one of Jordan’s speeches and share why they chose that speech.

# “DEMOCRACY IS NOT A SPECTATOR SPORT”

Barbara Jordan said “democracy is not a spectator sport.” The following are a list of actions inspired by Barbara Jordan that can support your community.

What do you plan to do?

Choose at least ONE action you’ll take in the next 30 days:

## Civic Participation

- Register to vote (or check registration status).
- Register five other people to vote.
- Contact an elected official about an issue.
- Attend a city council or school board meeting.
- Join a local civic organization.

## Learning and Dialogue

- Read a book about Barbara Jordan or constitutional history.
- Watch the documentary with family/friends and discuss.
- Have a conversation about democracy with someone who disagrees with you.
- Visit the Barbara Jordan Archives (if near Houston) or [explore the archives online](#).

## Representation and Advocacy

- Mentor a young person interested in politics or activism.
- Support (volunteer/donate) a candidate from an underrepresented group.
- Speak up about an issue at work, at school, or in the community.
- Research who represents you and what they’re doing.

## Leadership and Service

- Run for local office (school board, city council, etc.).
- Join a board or commission.
- Organize a community conversation on an issue you care about.
- Start or join a study circle on democracy.

Write down your commitment and add it to the poster board for everyone to see!

You can also share your commitment on social media using #IndieLensPBS.

## ACTION PLANNING GUIDE

If your group wants ongoing engagement, consider these collective actions:

- **Study Circle**—Meet monthly to discuss books, films, and current events related to democracy, representation, and civic responsibility.
- **Voter Engagement**—Organize voter registration drives, candidate forums, and get-out-the-vote efforts.
- **Leadership Pipeline**—Create a mentorship program connecting young people with experienced civic leaders.
- **Documentary Screenings**—Host regular film screenings and discussions on social justice topics.
- **Advocacy Campaign**—Select a local issue and collaborate for change (e.g., city budget, school policy).
- **Archive Project**—Document underrepresented voices and stories in your community; create oral histories.

Before people leave, have groups decide how they would like to follow up with each other:

- **Check in after 30 days**—Send email to participants: “How did you follow through on your commitment? What’s next?”
- **Follow up after 3 months**—Host a follow-up gathering: Share stories, celebrate wins, address barriers, and make new commitments.
- **Set a standard for ongoing communication**—Create an email list, social media group, or text chain to share resources, opportunities, and encouragement.
- **Establish accountability partners**—Before people leave, have them exchange contact info with one other person to check in on commitments.



## Potential Partnerships

### Organizations for Civic Engagement

- [League of Women Voters](#) – Nonpartisan voter education and advocacy
- [Rock the Vote](#) – Youth voter registration and engagement
- [Brennan Center for Justice](#) – Democracy, voting rights, and constitutional issues
- [Congressional Black Caucus Foundation](#) – African American political leadership development
- [Vote Run Lead](#) – Training women to run for office

### Organizations for Public Speaking

- [National Speech & Debate Association](#) – National speech and debate competition for middle and high school students
- [Youth Speaks](#) – National performance organization for youth



# Resources

## Books about Barbara Jordan

- Curtin, Mary Ellen. *She Changed the Nation: Barbara Jordan's Life and Legacy in Black Politics*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024.
- Jordan, Barbara, & Shelby Hearon. *Barbara Jordan: A Self-Portrait*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979.
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- Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.

## Archives and Online Resources

- [Barbara Jordan Archives](#) – Texas Southern University, Houston, TX.
- [C-SPAN Video Library](#) – Speeches and interviews.
- [LBJ Presidential Library](#) – Barbara Jordan oral histories and papers.
- Li, Haiying. ["Barbara Jordan Animated Timeline"](#). Barbara Jordan Archive, January 1, 2019.
- [National Women's History Museum](#) – Barbara Jordan biography and resources.
- [U.S. House of Representatives History](#) – Black Americans in Congress.

## On Democracy and the Constitution

- Amar, Akhil Reed. *America's Constitution: A Biography*. New York: Random House, 2005.
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- [Barbara Jordan Legacy](#). LBJ School of Public Affairs, University of Texas at Austin.
- [LGBTQ+ History Month: Barbara Jordan](#). National Archives, Pieces of History.

## Political Career and Major Speeches

- [Barbara Jordan](#). U.S. House of Representatives, History, Art & Archives.
- [Barbara Jordan: A Resource Guide](#), Library of Congress.

## Civil Rights Legislation and Cases

- [Brown v. Board of Education \(1954\)](#). National Archives.
- [Civil Rights Act \(1964\)](#). National Archives.
- [Voting Rights Act \(1965\)](#). National Archives.

## Constitutional Sources

- [13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: Abolition of Slavery \(1865\)](#). National Archives.
- [14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: Civil Rights \(1868\)](#). National Archives.
- [15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: Voting Rights \(1870\)](#). National Archives.
- [19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: Women's Right to Vote \(1920\)](#). National Archives.
- [The Constitution of the United States: A Transcription](#). National Archives.

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## INDIE LENS POP-UP

For more than 20 years, the award-winning Indie Lens Pop-Up program has partnered with local organizations across the country to bring people together for film screenings and community-driven conversations. Inspired by the documentaries featured on PBS's *Independent Lens*, Indie Lens Pop-Up is a space for sharing ideas and making connections that shape our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Since its inception in 2005, nearly half a million participants have come together at Indie Lens Pop-Up events to discuss issues that impact local communities. Learn more at [pbs.org/indielenspopup](http://pbs.org/indielenspopup).

## INDEPENDENT LENS

*Independent Lens* is an award-winning documentary series that fosters understanding, seeks to build empathy, and encourages a more united society. Produced by ITVS, *Independent Lens* documentaries have premiered on PBS for 25 years and streamed on YouTube, helping Americans foster deeper connections between communities and themselves. From the Oscar-nominated *I Am Not Your Negro* to the Peabody-acclaimed docuseries *Philly D.A.* and the Emmy® award-winning *The Invisible War*, *Independent Lens* provides viewers with in-depth, nuanced storytelling reflecting the experiences of people from a variety of voices and communities. Funding is provided by the Action Circle for Independent Lens with major funding from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Acton Family Giving, Ford Foundation, and Jonathan Logan Family Foundation, with additional support from Artemis Rising Foundation, Wyncote Foundation, Park Foundation, Brandt Jackson Foundation, the deNovo Initiative, and RandomGood Foundation. Additional support has been provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Learn more at [itvs.org](http://itvs.org).

Stream anytime on the PBS app or YouTube. Learn more at [pbs.org/independentlens](http://pbs.org/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 John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Acton Family Giving, Ford Foundation, Jonathan Logan Family Foundation, Artemis Rising Foundation, Wyncote Foundation, Park Foundation, Brandt Jackson Foundation, the deNovo Initiative, and RandomGood Foundation. Additional support has been provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Learn more at [itvs.org](http://itvs.org).

