Shadow and Substance
A look through the eyes of everyday African Americans unites past pain with present hope

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Transcript

[M. Labode] Stanley Burns, Dr. Stanley Burns, is an ophthalmological surgeon in New York City, and he loves photographs. He's been collecting old photographs for decades.

Barry Dressler, who is the president CEO of the Indiana State Museum, has worked with Dr. Burns previously and had the idea that it might be interesting to have an exhibit of African American photos from his collection.

One of the advantages of using images from the Dr. Burn's collection is that most of them are what you'd call vernacular images. They're family photographs, photographs taken for commercial purposes, things that weren't supposed to be art images. Because that they are vernacular images, there is some emotion behind it. My main goal was to have the viewers connect with the images.

Sometimes it's a positive connection. Sometimes it's a negative connection. Obviously, images of slavery are disturbing, but I wanted to have people look into other peoples' eyes across the decades and make some sort of connection.

I have been really fortunate that I teach students who are interested in history, African-American history, museum studies, and public history. IUPUI has very strong programs in both public history and museum studies.

I wanted to make sure that students who are interested in African-American history but don't come in with a background, will actually be able to understand what's going on. So I really have a great deal of gratitude toward the various students in the museum studies, African-American studies, Olanyian Scholars Program, and Public History Program who views that.

I think that one of these things that a lot of these photographs show is that they show something that Professor Robin D.G. Kelley called the "dream life" of African Americans - how they wanted to be represented, how they saw themselves. There are some images in this exhibit, images of slavery, lynching, and Jim Crow that show how the dominant society was portraying African Americans.

Some of these are really upsetting images, but I think the state museum and I agreed that it was important to have these images in there to show in some ways how far we've gone as a society but also how photography, the same folks, the same camera, the same process of development was used both to degrade African Americans and also by African Americans and their allies to celebrate their accomplishments, to protest conditions, and also to document everyday life.