Voices of African American Health

In collaboration with Delta Fine Arts, Inc., the Maya Angelou Center for Health Equity (MACHE) has created a distinctive photojournalism project entitled Voices of African American Health. The project, which was funded by The Society for the Arts in Healthcare in conjunction with Johnson & Johnson, empowers participants to tell their own unique stories of living with chronic illness as patients or caregivers. Moreover, the project serves to educate the community at-large about the national tragedy of racial and ethnic health disparities.

Twenty-four African Americans from Forsyth County, NC, and surrounding areas participated in the study. A range of health conditions was represented, including hypertension, diabetes, cancer, mental illness, and infant mortality.

To learn basic techniques of photography and journaling, participants met with renowned photographer Michael Cunningham and Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estés, celebrated writer, poet, and psychoanalyst. Participants were then provided with 4 disposable cameras each and allowed one month to document their lives in living with illness or taking care of others who suffer from disease.

After one month, all participants met for 2 moderated discussion groups: one to review journal vignettes and one to review photographs. Several common themes were revealed, including god and religion, family and friend support, caregiving, nature, emotion, the healthcare system, and coping mechanisms.

In conjunction with our community partner, study personnel selected photographs and corresponding journal vignettes for inclusion in a permanent art exhibit, which opened in the Delta Arts Center from November to December 2006. Over 860 community members, service providers, and government leaders attended the exhibit. The exhibit is now capable of traveling around the state and region as an educational opportunity to share these stories. The exhibit has so far appeared in medical centers, art galleries, and other educational settings.