

**Sabrina Artel Audio Stories**  
*Voices of Young Black Men about HIV/AIDS*

**SUPPORTING EFFECTIVE INTERVENTIONS, ADVOCACY AND  
POLICY WORK ON BEHALF OF YOUNG BLACK MSM LEADERS**

**Aquarius Gilmer**  
**6-16-15**

Artel: The HIV epidemic is devastating black men who have sex with men. HIV prevalence is estimated at 32% among BMSM.

[00:00:09] A strategic convening with young black MSM leaders was held June 14-16, 2015, at the Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health in New York City.

[00:00:22] To give some background, in June of 2014, the M•A•C AIDS Fund supported the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University to conduct a desk review of the context of the HIV epidemic among black men who have sex with men (BMSM) in the United States. The review was based on interviews, analysis of research, and government philanthropic interventions. It indicated that there were particular leadership access and advocacy issues for young men aged 35 and younger. As a result of this review, a convening was held a year later, June 14-16, at the Mailman School of Public Health. The convening was a collaboration between 24 YBMSM leaders from throughout the United States, the M•A•C AIDS Fund, the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University, and The Foundation for AIDS Research (amFAR).

[00:01:17] I'm Sabrina Artel, and I spoke with some of the young leaders at the convening. The 24 young leaders all work on HIV/AIDS advocacy in some

capacity. This includes direct services provision, research, policy work, organizing, grants management, the arts, and faith-based work.

[00:01:36]           The following conversation is with Aquarius Gilmer. Aquarius Gilmer is an independent consultant, and formerly the National Affiliate Services Coordinator for the National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS. He is a native of Greensboro, North Carolina, and completed his undergraduate studies in Alabama in political science. He then went on to pursue his Master's of Divinity degree with a concentration in Religion, Health and Science in 2011.

[00:02:09]           Aquarius Gilmer worked as a palliative care chaplain at Grady Memorial Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia, where he worked with patients, clinicians, caregivers and physicians to develop holistic care plans for patients living with HIV/AIDS and provided spiritual support to patients, caregivers and hospital personnel. While at Grady, he led several spirituality groups, and developed and facilitated curricula to assist people living with HIV/AIDS and improve the quality of their lives and health outcomes.

[00:02:41]           Aquarius is committed to social justice and the eradication of health disparities, believing wholeheartedly that we are called to be seekers and emitters of truth, light and justice.

[00:02:52]

Gilmer:           I'm Aquarius Gilmer. I am an independent consultant working at the intersections of public health, religion and spirituality, particularly around the black LGBTQ lives and the black community as a whole. It's my goal to facilitate healing and wholeness through teachings and even preachings that stimulate and heal the community and traumas that persons have experienced.

Artel: And Aquarius, you used the term, when we were speaking before, “religious trauma syndrome.” What is that?

[00:03:26]

Gilmer: Yeah. “Religious trauma syndrome” is a new diagnosis actually found in the DSM-V. The symptoms mirror those of post-traumatic stress syndrome, and so religious trauma syndrome is that of when a person has experienced trauma associated with religion experiences, growing up in churches or religious settings where you were not affirmed; where you were told that you would go to hell for being yourself; for not being fully human because you were gay, perhaps. It’s religious trauma syndrome that it comes out of.

Artel: You have a Divinity degree. So, what was the path towards that, and what now, as an activist, as an advocate working to prevent ... to stop HIV in the black male community, in the black male gay community. So, if you can share with us, within what communities are you working? How do you define it? And why, for you, is religion so critical?

[00:04:23]

Gilmer: Yeah. In my senior thesis of undergrad, I was assessing HIV in “black belt counties” of Alabama. What I noticed was that there was a tremendous public health failure infrastructure that was not in place, and also there was a psycho-social element of it that wasn’t in place. So, we interviewed pastors about this subject, and they were not interested in hearing it; in fact, they believed that it was still a punishment from God. And after hearing that, I wanted to know what was a faithful response to this epidemic.

[00:04:54]           And so, I went to Emory. I did work there, with Religion, Health and Science as my concentration, and I focused, really, on the social gospels. What did Walter Rauschenbusch do and Paul Tillich? What did Dr. King talk about? I mean, these are people who used the Christian tradition to change and to lead and steer the moral compass of this country. And just to think that at one time we didn't have child labor laws, but in fact it was a theologian who really helped us to stop those, and stop the practice of child labor, and then to put laws into place, to me is important.

[00:05:28]           Well, I'm a black gay man living with HIV. I see my work as a larger part of a continuum, to work with the black community. Black gay men do not live in silos or ghettos unto ourselves. We're terribly integrated into the communities. We don't have our own "gayborhood," so to speak. And while it's unfortunate that black gay men are living with HIV at the rates we're living with it. It's unfortunate that black LGBTQ youth are becoming even more harmed.

[00:05:55]           From my studies of the black church, my studies of the black community and the traditions of the black community, that's not our fabric. You don't turn a dog or a water hose onto a person who hates you and then kick your children out years later. It's not the same thing. Something happened in terms of how we see ourselves, how we see members of our community, and who we think are members of our community, 'cause the church for a large part has placated people and has made them sort of docile. And that placation has turned folk into seeing people who should be included in our community as "less than" and excluded.

Artel:           And Aquarius, do you see a space, then, within the churches for testing, for outreach, for advocacy?

[00:06:38]

Gilmer: Yeah. I mean, the possibilities are limitless—the things such as testing and things, as you know, sort of like these drop-in centers, if they really were committed to ... to think about doing.

[00:06:49] Even something as simple as, at my church, at the First Corinthian Baptist Church in Harlem, last year during World AIDS Day, our HIV/AIDS Ministry served us communion. That's a huge step—something small, but it has a huge gesture in that. And pastors can talk about what it means to be socially isolated and socially marginalized, and considered a blight. Right? Those are things that are easy that pastors could do. But again, I think it's going to take a stirring of the people to really say, "Pastor, could you ... would you ... I encourage you to do X, Y or Z," because that's where the power really sits.

Artel: Let's talk about your own vocation as a minister.

[00:07:31]

Gilmer: Yeah. As a minister, I'm an openly gay minister at a Baptist church that is primarily straight, and I see my work as dealing with, again, the psychosocial dynamics of persons, getting them to see themselves as God sees them; helping them to understand that they are okay; and to dispel the myth that sins actually separate you from God. I have come to believe that there is no place that God is not, and I think if more black gay men heard that—if more black gay men understood that within them already they have everything they need for the journey; it is mainly to be awakened. If more black gay men understood that, that self-love is important, it's to actually get there. And, I think that would be incredibly transformative for the movement.

[00:08:24] And during this time, Dr. King talked about these sort of "zeitgeist" moments during the Civil Rights movement—the spirit of the time. And I think

that we're really in one of those moments with what's going on in the world. People of good will, whether you're doing peace work, whether you're doing health work, it's really imperative that we do all we can. And my vocation is that I go around speaking at conferences—primarily ones dealing with HIV and AIDS, and others—and I'd go to conferences that are religious-based and get them to bring HIV back to the forefront again.

[00:09:00]           And so, my work is really to pull the margins to the center, and the center to the margins, and do preaching teaching workshops I do a lot of, and that's when I'm in my element.

Artel:           And where is this Baptist church?

[00:09:12]

Gilmer:        This is in Harlem on 116th and Adam Clayton Powell.

[00:09:16]           And who, we have transgender folks who come into our church. We have about 45% of our congregation are black gay men. And it speaks to the fact that the teachings are not held in damnation. The teachings are, "Love thyself; go deeper within yourself and come up a little bit stronger." The teaching are about full humanity—which are different.

Artel:        Aquarius, you're talking about social movements and justice and looking at theology in terms of how it has already shaped these movements. You're also sharing with us these ideas of wholeness and sort of peace within oneself and healing in order to even be able to engage, and to be able to take care of ourselves. So, could you talk about the role of healing within this movement to combat HIV?

[00:10:06]

Gilmer: Yeah. The role of healing—even say “spirituality” for me, because the slaves knew that they had harsh conditions that they were living by. But their spirits were not broken in that process. And I think what’s going on with black gay men, our spirits have been so crushed and broken by oppression, and because our spirituality ... our spiritual base—the black church, in particular—has not been really sustaining us through these hard times—through economic crisis, through the police brutality that we’re seeing—all these things that are going on.

[00:10:40]

The spirit of black gay men is really crushed and broken. And when you don’t think that your life is worth living, when you don’t think that tomorrow is for, or today even is for you, self-loathing, self-pity, self-hatred begins to seep in, and like a virus it spreads through your being and it gets in to infect your spirit. And if the spirit ... human spirit is broken—the human spirit is so severely damaged to the point that we can’t get you to see the beauty in yourself, then we have got to do some other sort of work on you and with you so that you can come back to yourself, because that’s what’s really ... I think really going on. With adherence rates among black gay men not being able to take a pill because, “What’s the use, right? I’m going to go to hell anyway, so let me just not take this pill ... just live my life.” And in fact they can live tomorrow, today, and then long ... just as long as someone who doesn’t have HIV.

Artel: Is there anything you feel is needed immediately within this movement, or that you see steps that you’ll be taking in the near future?

[00:11:40]

Gilmer: I think there’s a stirring that really has to take place. Again, people of good will of all sorts of walks of life, wherever you find yourself, those access points of power

to really advance this cause. And it's not just HIV. For black gay men it's HIV, it's unemployment, it's education attainment. It's all these things that most other humans deal with as well. And so, most immediately, we need allies and advocates.

[00:12:07] Substance abuse as well. I mean, again, it is this idea that, "I'm trying to numb myself from the pain of the world." And black spirituality gives you tools to deal with it if it never changes. So, if institutional racism remains the same from now until the next 25 years, it's the role of the black church in the lives of black people to be the prophetic voice for the community—and even the nation—because there was a black church and we helped steer some of the ... some of our "moral compass," so to speak.

[00:12:34]

Artel: Aquarius, thank you. Is there anything else you want to add?

Gilmer: No, I don't. I thank you for this ... for the time we shared together. Those who are listening to this, I would just admonish you really to do ... to do something. It may just be to have a conversation with a family member about HIV; to ask a question, to your physician about HIV. It could even be, you know, going and volunteering for a day—finding out for yourself what you could do ... the smallest things. And if you hear something said that's inappropriate or that rubs you the wrong way, say something about it, 'cause we all can have a part in stopping stigma as well.

Artel: Thank you so much. I'm speaking with Aquarius Gilmer.

Gilmer: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]