

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**

Blake Rowley
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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.

[00:00:21] 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).

[00:01:12] 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] Blake Rowley is a graduate of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, where he began addressing HIV. He provided testing with the university's Health Center, and continued his work as a Research Associate at the acclaimed Fenway Institute.

[00:01:51] In addition, he has worked a variety of other research projects, looking at issues of substance use and potential PrEP utilization, poly-substance use, sex parties, and pornography. He is currently the Manager of Health Equity Prevention at the National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors. He manages direct and peer-to-peer technical assistance to state health departments on issues related to gay men, specifically black and Latino gay men, MSM youth, and women.

[00:02:19] He is also the current chair of the Young Black Gay Men's Leadership Initiative, which is a national movement of young black men addressing issues disproportionately affecting their peers, which a particular focus on HIV prevention, care and treatment.

[00:02:33]

Rowley: My name is Blake Rowley. I work for the National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors out of Washington, DC. I'm also the Chair of the Young Black Gay Men's Leadership Initiative and a working group member of the HIV Prevention Trials Network Black Caucus.

[00:02:45] So, I do a lot of work as it pertains to the leadership development of young black gay men, as well as some of the research needs as it also pertains to young black gay men in general, particularly between the ages of 18 and 30.

Artel: So, what are the specifics, then, of your advocacy work?

[00:03:00]

Rowley: So, we found that a lot of black gay men, in particular, don't have the tools and resources that they need to successfully navigate healthcare as well as just to navigate themselves as it pertains to becoming better leaders or more involved in their community, or sort of having the skill sets to advance themselves. Oftentimes we get stuck in situations like outreach workers because we're needed for particular projects, and we're not invited to the table or spaces like Research or Policy and Advocacy to actually influence decisions with the people that need to hear those ... those particular conversations.

[00:03:32] Also, our stories for a long time have not been told, and so a lot of what I'm interested in doing is elevating the platform of black gay men to tell their story and figure out what's at the crux of that that's either universal or unique that's ... that's different from sort of the white gay population and community, and where do we need to spend some really concerted attention and effort, and how do we drive the HIV epidemic amongst young black gay men specifically.

[00:03:54] So, I got into this work because I decided that I wasn't going to go to law school, and I really sat with a friend of mine who's now a preacher, and said that I wanted to talk about sex, but I wanted to talk about sex through a specific black gay lens. And so, there was an inescapable HIV surrounding that, so the only effective way to really talk about sex in the way I wanted to, from a research lens, was to talk about HIV and the myriad issues that plague black men as it pertains

to HIV risk, treatment adherence, pre-exposure prophylaxis or preventing HIV via the use of biomedical intervention. And so, that's how I really got into this was really wanting to talk about the sex that people were having, and how to have better sex and healthy sex, and then it sort of blew up into figuring out how to prevent disease and figuring out how to elevate stories and how to build capacity among people.

Artel: Was there a moment when you knew that this was the direction you wanted to go — you were really going to immerse yourself in this activism and advocacy work?

[00:04:55]

Rowley: So, I had previously been a teacher, and it was really because I was noticing so many of my friends who were seroconverting, and I wanted to ... I personally wanted to have better sex and wanted some of my friends to have better sex, and sort of just literally sat in a car one day and said, "I think I want to talk about sex and research," and figure out how to ... how to do some of the things that I've already mentioned. And so, that was the ... the turning point of doing this.

[00:05:21] In terms of the impetus for the future, I think that my long-term goal is ideally become a research professor at a university and sort of unpack some of the sexuality and stigma issues that occur, and a lot of the things that increase our risks for HIV, as well as, as we think about prevention, some of the things that prohibit us from sort of staying adherent to condoms or pre-exposure prophylaxis, and as we get new means that come in the future like injectable PrEP or patches and things ... or microbicides and things of that nature, what are going to be some of the issues and barriers that ... that black gay men face as it relates to utilization and uptake and adherence of those particular measures.

Artel: I know with the work that you're doing you're addressing issues that are disproportionately affecting your peers – or affecting young gay black men. Why is that, do you think?

[00:06:11]

Rowley: So, I think that, you know, the system has been set up, really, to respond to white people. And so, black people in general are already disproportionately impacted by a myriad of sort of social ills, and those things are encompassing education, transportation, healthcare literacy and access, etc. And so, I think as we unpack things like sexuality and stigma and HIV, we also have to begin to unpack those other things that have sort of also put us at ... at a disadvantage.

[00:06:40] And so, why is it that we don't have comprehensive sexual education to teach young black gay men about anal cancer, and, you know, the ... the other STDs that could occur? Why is it that as we think about housing individuals who have been incarcerated, or young black gay men who have been kicked out of their homes can't find housing in the ways in which that they need to, and thus they turn to things like commercial sex work that we know put them at risk for other things, or crime that put them back into the prison-industrial complex that does no good for any of us?

Artel: So, in this research that you're interested in, that you're involved with, is this ... I know you're based out of DC currently, so are you working on a federal level, the national level, or would you say that then you go out into specific communities?

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Rowley: So, I think it's kind of a mixture of both, so some of the research is given through NIH and ... and whatnot, so we ... we do specific, like, intervention work to look

at how – particularly with HPTN 073 right now – how is it that black men are going to uptake and utilize PrEP, since we know that the initial studies that came out around PrEP that showed it to be efficacious did include black gay men hardly at all. So, we want to sort of look at those things.

[00:07:48] In terms of day-to-day work, I do get ... receive funding from the CDC to do work specifically with health departments, and have previously done work specifically with health departments and how they responded to the epidemic for black gay men. It's definitely a combination of all of those things.

[00:08:02] YBGLI, however, sort of exists in this strange ethos where we get to do whatever we want, and that mission is really encompassing of sort of taking those black voices – those younger black voices that don't have those seats at the table – amplifying them and connecting them with the mentors and the people that they need to be connected to be extremely successful in their life in whatever those regards are. Everyone's not designed to be a researcher; everyone's not designed to be a policy person Some people want to do outreach, and that's fine. But how do we take you to do outreach and move you and become the best sort of, like, leader of that that you can be?

Artel: What do you see are the important issues now moving forward?

[00:08:37]

Rowley: I definitely think we have to spend some real time thinking about social determinants of health and how we break down those barriers. I think we've often thought of HIV, particularly in the past few years, as a ... as sort of like *the* thing in ... in our community, and for the lives of many black gay men, HIV is jut ... it may be on the radar, but it's not the most important thing that we have on the

radar. We ... We face so many other ... other issues that are either not talked about at length, or not given appropriate attention.

[00:09:05] I also think that we need to spend some – and it’s sort of off-topic – spend some real time looking at how art education or how arts have impacted our response to the epidemic. We’ve not thought about that, and they’ve often been left out of the table, and we know that art and culture have drastically shaped who we are now, and also how we’ve historically responded to the epidemic.

Artel: Who are you wanting to reach?

[00:09:25]

Rowley: Specifically to young black gay men. Like, “Get out there, tell your story; you matter; you’re valid. There’s always a community of people for you around somewhere, even when you don’t feel like you may have one. Don’t let anybody continue to ... to browbeat you or tell you that you’re not good enough, because at the end of the day you are here now.”

Artel: Thank you so much, Blake.

Rowley: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]