

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**

Brandon Dykes
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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.

[00:00:22] 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] Brandon Dykes is a Junior at the American Intercontinental University, where he is majoring in International Business, with a concentration in Public Policy. He is engaged in the community as a public speaker, activist, and a community service leader.

[00:01:51] He has served on many local and national committees that deal with bettering the LGBT community.

[00:01:57] Brandon has won numerous awards, including a proclamation from the city of Atlanta; National Youth Pride Services; LGBT Hall of Fame recipient; and the Atlanta Journal Cup. In addition, he is one of the founders of Nu Phi Zeta Fraternity.

[00:02:11] He works to help inspire black gay men to realize their potential.

[00:02:17]

Dykes: I am Brandon Dykes. I am originally from Louisiana, but now I work in Nashville, Tennessee. I've been there for about six months now, but I started my work in the HIV prevention field about three years ago.

[00:02:31] I would say that I became involved out of fear. Initially, I was really scared based on all the things they said. I said that could possibly be me because of all of our risk factors, I mean, different things that I was hearing, especially with HIV specifically, but of course the other STDs as well, and it forced me to kind of get a better understanding, research things, find things, so that I could know and protect myself. And throughout the process it became a passion. It

became a passion because it's something that I felt like I had to go out and find and search for, and now I'm tasked with trying to figure out how to spread the same information and make it receptive to people so that they actually take the information so it's not just like big textbooks or big things, but doing the different interventions that's out there, trying to show them people that are doing it that are young, and are trying to help.

[00:03:24] Nowadays I love that at the forefront it's not the older people out there trying to do the outreach; it's the younger crowd trying to get our generation in. And I think for me it was completely the fear – the fear of catching something or being another statistic.

Artel: So, Brandon, you are still at university.

Dykes: Yes.

Artel: And you're living in Nashville, Tennessee. You were afraid of HIV and AIDS specifically for yourself, and this is because of your community surrounding you, your friends. What's happening?

[00:03:56]

Dykes: I think one of the main things that made me have this fear is lots of my friends and different people that I know, and they're becoming infected with HIV and AIDS, and immediately I noticed inside the black gay community every time someone gets sick or dies, that's usually the first thing that people say, but they don't think about the heart attacks and the cancers and all that stuff.

[00:04:26] So, it's like, out of everything that could happen to a person, that's just been one of the main things that kind of scares me, and it's a fear of mine,

because I feel like although I know that the world has progressed so much and there are so many things out there, that you can still live and carry on; but for me, I told myself that if I ever actually got infected, I'm not sure how I would handle it, because I work in the field so much advocating for trying to help, trying to reduce my risk, trying to help others reduce their risk, so the fear sits in my head every time I take a test. And I take tests more often than other people, and I have much lower risk, which is, I tell people, "Every time I see a HIV test, I normally take it," just because they say sometimes it shows up later; sometimes they don't ... one test may not detect it. So, it's every time, that 30 minutes of taking that test is the fear of not knowing what the results could possibly be.

[00:05:24]

As I've been doing this work, creating my own projects and different things like that, I started a fraternity. We are Nu Phi Zeta Fraternity Inc. We are based out of Atlanta, Georgia, but we have members in nine states and 16 cities. And we do not label ourselves as a gay fraternity; we kind of keep it open, but most of the membership inside of it does identify as homosexual. And the intent of the organization was to help men realize their true potential, because our organization tackles lots of the issues within the gay community, so we're able to focus on things that impact ourselves. Just like the HIV and PrEP, every conference we ever have, we always sessions that surround things like that, being able to provide this network of people that ... which offers support, so you can see people who are ... who may be infected, and they can tell you what they're doing and how to help you, and things like that.

[00:06:22]

I know in Nashville I worked as a HIV Prevention Specialist, so I go into clubs, I go into bars, schools, and different places to find people who fit the demographics of 14-29 that are at high-risk – so, any black gay men who have sex with men.

[00:06:40] Doing the work ... so, it's fun. It's different because I tell people all the time ... I joke about, like, "My job is to find gay men. What better job could I ask for?"

Artel: How do you actually have that conversation?

[00:06:52]

Dykes: Most of the time we're in a club. That particular setting is usually one where people don't really want to talk about what I do. So, usually when we're in a club, we do have a table that offer[s] testings and stuff. So, I would typically walk up to someone as if I'm going to have a casual conversation and say, "Hey, my name is Brandon; how are you; what's your name?" Then I ask them, are they from here, do they live around here, and things of that nature. I usually try to ask them some questions about them so I can know how to tailor what I'm about to say. And through that, I usually tell them, "I work for an empowerment project in Nashville, Tennessee. I would love to tell you more about it. Is it possible that I can have your number?" And they usually give me their number, and I follow up with them immediately the next day so that they could remember who I am.

[00:07:37] But doing that, I think the main thing is approaching people in a sense of ... like, you're not trying to sell them at the club, 'cause no one came to a club for that, but being able to offer it to them later. And sometimes I would say I may leave the club with about between 15-20 numbers, and I may get about 5-10 people from that to enroll into my program. So, I definitely know we don't get involved from the club, but at least they know who I am and what I offer, and I'm here if you need something.

[00:08:07] So, we usually use clubs, schools, gyms. We use the social apps Jack'd and Grindr and Adam for Adam trying to figure out how to meet people where

they are, 'cause we realize we may not run into everybody on college campuses. So, usually we tap into people['s] networks and ask them where do they hang out or what do they like to do. And Nashville is pretty small, so they don't really have a lot of clubs. We don't have a lot of clubs, so we don't have a lot of club outreach, so lots of people have house parties, so we try to figure out how to get our name on the list for when they're telling people about these house parties. And my goal inside the conversation is to get them into my office to talk about stuff. You get something different every day.

[00:08:51] I think creating more networks like gay fraternities or social groups like YBGLI [Young Black Gay Mens Leadership Initiative] is really helping, because some of the people that I'm in the room with today, I've seen in other places. We bring people; we try to tell people about the work that we do; invite them to some of the conferences.

[00:09:09] I'll tell you, these things are helping, but I've tasked myself with trying to figure out how does someone who doesn't do anything that I do figure out about this stuff, 'cause some of the things you wouldn't find out unless you're inside of a network or unless you're inside of something.

[00:09:25] I am working on figuring out ... I think, well, my fraternity does help with that because we accept people who are in college and out of college to provide some type of support. So, if you find us, then you could be a part.

[00:09:36] But, I think the different groups and coalitions and things that are formed and have people that are able to offer us free conferences to learn about this information are definitely really helping, 'cause people would go. You know, most of the time I tell people about different events and different conferences. I usually first say "It's free – it's a free conference. They're going to take you there." And people like to travel, so that's like, "Okay, I'm going to go." [They]

end up getting more than they expected. They end up falling for it, loving it, and they've been to most of the conferences with me.

[00:10:06] So, everywhere I usually go, if I can, I try to bring someone with me, and it kind of keeps going from there.

[00:10:12] I think one of the things that we primarily need is [INAUDIBLE ??] to a lot of people why HIV is at every conference that we do, because it's ... we're mostly impacted by it and we have the highest infection rate, constantly growing fast. So, I try to tell people that ...

[00:10:30] I notice a lot of people have been rejecting me or the programs and the different things that I do because the main thing that they hear is HIV or AIDS, and they're telling me that they're kind of tired of it, and they're ... like, there's other things that they feel that are important to them, for as housing or food or ... I kind of think when you have to worry about where you're going to sleep at night or where you're going to eat the next day, then you're really not thinking about HIV or AIDS.

[00:10:58] So, trying to figure out how to deliver those same messages, it's ... or, focus on people's housing and their food and things like that. But throw in a component of STDs or AIDS in there some type of way so you're not ... you're not immediately rejected because they think you're about to talk to them about HIV or AIDS.

[00:11:15]

Artel: Anything else you'd like to share?

Dykes: I would like to share that, I think there's been ... definitely been a lot of progress, and I can see constant movement, like, lots of people that are in the room – just the different things that we do and the different areas that we're in – I can feel the impact ... because me, only being 21, and being able to sit at some of the tables with people have finished and got their MPHs and stuff. And for me, I personally never desired a degree in public health, but it's a passions of mine[']s] now. Me, being a Business major, I kind of thought about nonprofits and international travel, so my goal is to figure out, “How can I do the work that I do on an international level?” And I love working with my demographic, being black and gay, but I've always been open to exploring [sounds like (??)] other rims (??) and helping other people in other cultures and things like that.

[00:12:10] So, I like to take what we're doing, and realizing that HIV is more than just black and more than just gay; it's women and men [sounds like (??)] in (??) and (??) everywhere. So, coming up with a holistic approach, and still individual approach as well.

Q: Thank you so much.

Dykes: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]