

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**

Darwin Thompson
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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).

[00:01:17] 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] Darwin Thompson is a graduate of Morehouse College with a degree in Sociology. He currently serves as the Director of Programs for NAESM Inc., a national nonprofit specializing in health disparities for marginalized populations.

[00:01:49] In his current role, Darwin oversees the organization's community-based programs, manages logistics on grant applications, evaluates programs, and serves as the Conference Director for NAESM Annual Leadership Conference. He is trained several CDC behavioral interventions including Empowerment, d-Up, and 3MV.

[00:02:09] Before his current role, he has worked in DC as a Dean of Students for DC Public Schools, and has also been involved in nonprofits that specialize in housing and healthcare for homeless populations.

[00:02:22] When Darwin is not working, he spends his time refereeing both high school and college basketball, where he has officiated several championship games, with a highlight being the 2013 VISAA State Championship.

[00:02:36]

Thompson: I'm Darwin Thompson. I currently reside in Atlanta, Georgia, by way of Washington, DC. I am currently the Associate Executive Director of Mason Inc., which is a nonprofit specializing in HIV prevention for black gay men in Atlanta.

[00:02:49] So, when we look at health disparity, it's such a broad topic. But when we kind of focus it around HIV prevention, there's a couple things that we don't necessarily look at as a health disparity, i.e., the homeless population when it comes to black gay men who are HIV+.

[00:03:02] So, part of my work really, really is to look at that and to identify priorities and best practices to address homelessness among YMSM – young men who have sex with men who are HIV+ – because what we look at is that if someone is stably housed, then they are apt to become virally suppressive, become adherent to the medication vs. if they were not, which means they've not considered their medication a priority.

[00:03:27]

Artel: How are you providing outreach and advocacy around this issue?

Thompson: So, what we have done at NAESM is, we are in the process of opening four transitional homes. So, we have two off the ground now, so we currently house 13 individuals and we provide them with intentional case management and supportive services. So, we help them enroll in benefits; we provide them free food; we provide them linkage to medical care, ultimately with a goal of them to become virally suppressed.

[00:03:54] And so, when this project is off the ground, we'll be able to house 24 individuals.

[00:03:59] Now, that might be a drop in the bucket with the homeless population in Atlanta, but it's somewhere to start; it's somewhere to really, really look at, if this model is successful, how do we expand it to really, really connect housing to viral suppression?

[00:04:11]

Artel: And what is that connection? Help me understand what this connection is between homelessness and HIV.

Thompson: So, we look at the rates when it comes to HIV and ... For me, it really says that if I'm homeless – which means, you know, the proper definition is, I don't have a lease in my name, or maybe I'm couch surfing or staying with someone – then I might be apt to engage in survival sex or go to a bathhouse or put myself more at risk when it comes to contracting HIV – or having it and not really taking care of myself because my priority is to survive.

[00:04:44] So, when we connect that, we look at ... and I ... part of my work when I was doing direct services was really, really working with that population to connect them to resources. Now, day after day I would see young men who would come in and they would not have a place to live, and they would test positive, and they would be more concerned about where their next meal was coming from, or where they were going to lay their head, than me leaning to get them on medication or to a doctor to take care of their other STIs.

[00:05:10] And so, what we ... what I found out, if I provide you with a stable environment and targeted support, which is, as I said, case management, but then also job readiness skills, career development ... and we really, really develop an individual goals plan and the case manager follows it, then not only are we going to assist you with becoming virally suppressed, but we're going to assist you with becoming a ... a productive citizen in Georgia.

Artel: How many people are you talking about? How large an issue is this?

Thompson: So, the last – and I don't have the exact stats in front of me – but the last grant I wrote when I talked about homelessness, I think it was about 16,000 homeless individuals who identified as HIV+ in Atlanta.

[00:05:52]

Artel: If you could address these numbers ...

Thompson: So, HIV automatically comes with a lot of stigma. And so, with that stigma entails a lot of different things. So, in Atlanta is very, very transient, and people coming from all over, we look at they test positive, and then there's that stigma associated with, "Now I'm HIV +, but I still don't have anywhere to go, so I'm not going to disclose my status because I need to stay in this environment to survive because I don't have the skills necessary."

[00:06:22] So, when I look at that – and I really look at ... and really become intentional about where we need to go as far as bringing this ... this notion of community viral load down ... So you look at housing with supportive services, which my organization is doing, but then also developing a soft skills- job training program for young men who have sex with men who reside in Atlanta – give them those skills to be able to navigate the workforce.

[00:06:46] So, when I talk to one of my friends who works at HR, he'll say 80% of the people who lose their job don't lose their job because of poor performance; they lose their job because they don't know how to navigate supervisor ... supervisory relationships or coworker relations. So, really, really being intentional about working with this population to develop a curriculum, develop a program that will address these issues and allow them to, you know, become self-sufficient.

[00:07:09] So, it all kind of works together ... so, it's this whole revolving circle. And I think if we look at it from that lens, then we'll be able to kind of really, really put a pulse on bringing this community viral load down.

Artel: And Darwin, what is your personal connection to being engaged with this advocacy work?

Thompson: So, my personal connection is, umm ... So, both my parents are HIV+, and so, as a HIV- male, HIV has always been around my family and my life. But then, more importantly, I grew up in foster care, so I ... I transitioned to about eight ... maybe 8-10 different foster homes between 2 months and 21. So, me not knowing where my next meal was coming from oftentimes, or me not really knowing where I was going to lay my head at, and so I've always wanted to work on these type of issues.

[00:07:56] So, when I got out of Morehouse, you know, HIV was a natural fit; but then there was also that connection around, you know, how do we connect these two dots? So, these have always been my passion since I was very, very young.

[00:08:08]

Artel: What is the experience for you, then, as a young leader in this movement to be working within your own community in that way?

Thompson: I go by this mantra that, you know, my past is my crutch. And so, working in this community, I often ... oftentimes work with young guys, letting them know, "Whatever your situation is, it's not your crutch. You know, you can be positive, you could be negative, you could be homeless, but at the end of the day we can work to get out of the situation." So, really, really being a young leader is, for me, is to, you know ...

[00:08:36] I think someone said in a conversation yesterday is about what my legacy looks like. And so, for me being a young leader, it's to really look at it and say, "If I help one person a day, then I'm doing something – something right." And so, that's what my legacy, and that's what being a young leader in this community is about – it's continuing to do the fight that some of the people, like Rudy Carnes

and ...-some of the work they did, and really taking their coattail ... or taking that torch and running with it.

[00:09:02]

Artel: So, you're also talking about issues of empowerment, so building a sense of self and community. And why do you see this as something so critical within the gay black male community?

Thompson: I think that we oftentimes ... So, that community – the black gay male community – is something that they have their own community, but then they don't necessarily know how to foster that community. And so, really working with them to understand what community is, understand that they're valuable, understanding that it's not all about sex, it's not all about drugs, but it's about really, really being a productive citizen and really understanding that and getting them to realize that, because there is a lot of trauma in this community. There's a lot of mental health issues. There's a lot of things that we just don't address and we don't talk about.

[00:09:50] And so, we really, really have to help them identify those issues to help them become productive citizens.

Artel: And what are some of the traumas?

Thompson: So, some of the traumas are, you know, being put out of your house at a[n] early age because you identify as gay; becoming HIV+ early; not having a father figure, so seeking ... seeking relationships with older individuals because you really, really want that type of presence in your life; not having the proper educational background to survive.

[00:10:17] It's those types of things that ... you know, we look at ... at that, and we really, really have to start addressing those issues.

[00:10:25] So, when we think about it, there are a conglomerate of issues that we have to tackle when we talk about HIV, especially around young men who have sex with men.

[00:10:35] And so, I think that organizations like mine[s] and other organizations across the country are doing a really good job at identifying these issues and really, really trying to work holistically to address all these issues and not just address the HIV status, 'cause if just singularly address the HIV status, then I don't think that we are going to get to that level where we're reducing community viral load.

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Artel: And where do you see the movement going for yourself and in your own community? What do you think is needed the most?

Thompson: So, outside of growing my own organization that I work for in Atlanta, I think it's really, really ... we're doing a good job at connecting young leaders together and being a support system for them. So, you know, whether it's assisting with grant applications; whether it's, you know, assisting with them building their own organizations and just really, really helping, that's where I see myself. I see myself as a[n] added resource. Someone that's 27 in an executive-level position, albeit it might be a small organization, I think that there's some resources I can do to really assist my fellow colleagues and ... and their work.

[00:11:37] Personally, it's gratifying. I think that ... I tell my friends all the time, "I love my job. I'm doing something that I absolutely love to do," and so, every day

that I get up, it's like going to assist the next person, and I absolutely tremendously love it.

[00:11:53] And so, I wouldn't trade it for the world. I would ... Ten years I hope to be still in my community with my boots to the ground, pants leg rolled up, and doing the work, 'cause I think that oftentimes we forget about doing the work and really, really just doing the work to reduce HIV in Atlanta.

[00:12:10]

Artel: So, Darwin, you talked about both your parents being HIV+, yourself growing up in foster care. What is your message to the young people that you meet today that might have fear?

Thompson: I often tell people that, "Your circumstances aren't your crutch, so don't allow situations to dictate your future." I think that growing up, you know, in DC, in the foster care setting, there was something that said I was going to be a statistic – that I wasn't going to make it. And they said I defied the odds.

[00:12:40] I don't think I defied the odds. I think that what's for me is for me, and you can't allow negative situations to affect you from being successful. That would be my message to the people, is to really, really ... to not let those situations affect them, but to really work through those things and to, you know, put your best foot forward.

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Artel: Darwin, in addition to all of this advocacy work you're doing, you're also refereeing basketball, and I'm wondering how this fits in to joy, to connection to community, and it seems like to me there is some sort of connection.

[00:13:12]

Thompson: So I have a work-life balance, which I'm okay with. And so, part of what I do is, as kind of my coping mechanism, 'cause I do direct service – diagnose people – and so, I referee basketball, so it gives me the peace of mind not to worry about prevention; it gives me the peace of mind not to worry about the individual who is sleeping under the bridge or sleeping on someone's couch who is going to become infected because they don't have anywhere to go; or who doesn't understand about PrEP or that type.

[00:13:43] So, it really, really allows me to travel; it allows me to have five or six hours in the car just to get a little peace of mind, and then once I'm done and I get off the floor, it gives me the energy to do the ... to get up and do the work all over again.

[00:13:56] So, I think that, you know, I encourage people to get tested regularly if they're engaged in any type of sexual contact. I encourage them to get tested every 3-6 months. If you're HIV- or in a sero-discordant relationship – which means that you're negative and your partner's positive, or you're positive and your partner's negative – then I encourage you to really, really consider, you know, the pre-exposure prophylaxis, or PrEP, because I think that we have to educate our community about every tool that's in our tool belt when it comes to preventing HIV.

[00:14:25] And so, that would be my message, is to really, really understand the virus and to educate yourself around all the tools, and then choose a tool that's necessary for you.

[00:14:36] And so, also, I think that – and I go to a very affirming church in Atlanta – is that, you know, we have to understand the connection between spirituality and

man, period. And so, I think that I oftentimes see individuals in the church, but the church isn't necessarily doing the best job in addressing HIV. And so, we have to really understand that sex happens in a church. Whether we want to acknowledge it or not, it happens. And so, we need to do a better job at, you know, talking about it and being realistic in the church.

[00:15:08] So, at my church, you know, specifically, I've done HIV testing at my church for National HIV Testing Week, and for World AIDS Day. But I've also talked about prevention in front of the congregation – talked about stats in Atlanta, what we could do differently, you know, my take on it. So, I think that as we move to be more progressive, I think I really hope that the faith-based community takes a more active role in prevention.

[00:15:34] So, follow me on Instagram, @blueswag 5 Twitter, @blueswag5. If you are a young MSM who wants to attend our leadership conference, registration is open for our leadership conference. It's going to be in L.A. this year. Or you can always e-mail me at dartwint@naesm.org. I'm more than happy to talk; I'm more than happy to provide advice; no counseling, because I'm not a counselor, but I have someone on my staff who could do it.

Artel: Thank you so much, Darwin Thompson.

Thompson: Thank you.

Artel: You're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]