

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**

Marreo McDonald
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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] Marreo McDonald is a 2012 graduate of Jackson State University with a degree in Accounting. He has served in dual roles at My Brother's Keeper (MBK) as both a trainer-facilitator with the "Many Men, Many Voices" intervention, as well as operating as the Grants Management Specialist. His work includes providing a safe space for his peers to come and be educated on better approaches to take as high-risk negative not to acquire HIV or other STDs/STIs. He is involved with venue-based outreach community presentations, counseling, testing, and the referrals team.

[00:02:10] Even though his career is in accounting, Marreo says he is really passionate about the work of prevention in HIV and its possibilities for viral suppression and the reduction of the incidence rate in the African American black community.

[00:02:24]

McDonald: My name is Marreo McDonald. I work for My Brother's Keeper as the Grants Management Specialist in Jackson, Mississippi. I've been in this work for 4+ years. I did two years of volunteer work with My Brother's Keeper, and out of my two years of volunteer work they saw my work ethics because I was the President of the Advisory Board for many of their programs.

[00:02:47] So, they saw my work ethics and it was like, "You're experienced now, so we might as well go ahead and hire you."

Artel: So, Marreo, you work in Jackson, Mississippi, and, as you say, you work with My Brother's Keeper. What is it that you're doing, and what is it that the organization is tackling?

[00:03:04]

McDonald: I used to work in prevention where I was the Training Facilitator for Many Men, Many Voices, which is behavior intervention. They got black MSMs out to educate them on better approaches they can take in order to, you know, stay in less risk for HIV, or contracting any other STDs. And then, I graduated from Jackson State with my degree in Accounting, so then I became the Grants Management Specialist; and now I'm just, like, putting my ideas out on paper and being the visionary at My Brother's Keeper.

[00:03:35] I'm trying to envision a program to where it is culturally sensitive to the black community in general, and no matter your sexual orientation, your religious belief or anything like that – just getting the message out about HIV and educating our community on better approaches they can take on not acquiring HIV; if you are positive, approaches that you can take to stay healthy and live out your dreams.

Artel: What are some of these approaches, if you can give us an example of the kind of advocacy work that you're doing in your neighborhood in Mississippi?

[00:04:10]

McDonald: So, we have many methods a person can take in order not to acquire HIV. We have PrEP, which is a biomedical intervention. If they're negative, they can take a pill, Truvada, like, every day, and it'll protect them. It's like protective sex ... like, people keep on saying, "protective sex" and using condoms as a protective sex;

PrEP is now a method of protective sex. And so, I want to get that message out there because we have people that are in love and sero-discordance couples.

[00:04:43] so, we ... we need to get the message out that there is a way that you can still be in a relationship and still stay negative as long as you take the necessary precautions you need to do to protect yourself.

[00:04:54] We have a lot of people that are fighting against the alternative lifestyles, so it's harder to work toward a positive environment because we have so much negativity around the subject. So, we need to educate our policymakers, educate our school board, our superintendents, our parents, and we need to get them to understand that this is an epidemic that's destroying our community, and we need to get people more educated about it so we can better support our community in this epidemic that we have.

Artel: What are some of your thoughts on the epidemic?

[00:05:34]

McDonald: It's hard to actually pinpoint. Like, I see so many people labeling HIV as a negative thing with negative consequences, like prostitution, gay sex ... when, what is gay sex? Male and female heterosexual couples have anal sex, and they have oral sex. So, what is considered gay sex? And a lot of heterosexual people think they are not at risk for HIV because they are not having gay sex.

Artel: You mentioned that you really believe in providing advocacy that will reach all different kinds of people, not one particular group. Could you elaborate on that?

[00:06:19]

McDonald: Well, HIV is already stigmatized. It's been stigmatized since it first hit the United States as "gay cancer," "gay disease," you know. We need to get away from that because if we make the focus on the MSM community, then, like I said earlier, the other people wouldn't think that they're at risk. So the heterosexual community doesn't think that they're at risk because it's a gay disease.

[00:06:43]

Artel: How did you become, Marreo, involved yourself? How did you know that this was going to be a path that you would take, working within your own community?

McDonald: I didn't know. It was just, like ... it just happened. Like, I came from a small town in Mississippi called Carthage, Mississippi, and we don't discuss HIV. We still don't discuss HIV. When I go home it's like a discussion that I have with my family, but it's just something that we don't discuss because we haven't dealt with it, and the people that do deal with it – they go to Jackson for treatment. So, we don't have an infectious disease doctor in Carthage to actually treat anybody. So, we don't discuss HIV.

[00:07:23] And so, I was kind of lost. When I went to Jackson State, I went to Jackson State in 2009, I got acquainted with MBK, and when getting acquainted with MBK, they educated me, and I wanted [to] actually gain more knowledge about how to protect myself. And as I continued to gain knowledge about protecting myself, I wanted to deliver that same information to people that I know it wasn't reaching.

[00:07:48] And that's what we really deal with in the south, is like, family rejection and rejected in the church. And I have friends who have ... and associates ... who have tested positive and they think that life is over. With me being educated about HIV, I kind of like educate them through their process, and I'm there with them to

actually help them be progressive through their process and not just hinder their process of growing with HIV, because HIV is like a baby – like, it’s something else that you have to take care of other than yourself. And you have to make that baby a part of you, and you have to raise that baby. You can’t let that baby control you; you have to control the baby. And you have to tell that baby, “This is what we’re going to do, and when you get grown you can do what you want to do.”
[LAUGHTER]

[00:08:43] So, that’s how I look at HIV, like, “That is your child; you have to have a whole ’nother lifestyle according to your new baby.”

Artel: How do you talk to your community members and the people that you’re working with in Mississippi knowing about the rejection that can so often happen in families and by the church?

McDonald: I’m kind of spiritual myself. I’m not religious, but I’m more spiritual – like, I have a connection with God. And I read the Bible and I ask God for my own understanding, and like, whatever message comes to me is for me to deliver to somebody else. And I’ve kind of strayed away from the church because I see that a lot of people is opinionated about the Bible, and you can’t use the Bible to hinder somebody else, like ... the Bible is used for a guide as to the perfect life. It’s just like monks with Buddhism, you know? They follow Buddhism guidance; they don’t try to tear anybody down; they don’t try to tear another religious down. They’re, like, every religious is for ... for the person. But you have to use it as a guidance to life. Everything happened to me for a reason; I’m going to have to take it and I’m going to have to be strong about it, and I’m going to have to deal with it accordingly ... you know?

[00:10:03] So, I just try to encourage them by using learnings that I found and ... on the internet .. like, I found that homosexuality was written in the Bible in 1946. So, when did God ... he just put it on somebody’s head in 1946 to say

homosexuality was an abomination of him? You know, why was he ... And he died for our sins, so why we can't forgive like I have and move forward. He dealt with sins so much differently.

[00:10:36] And so, I just try to educate our community on, like, the way that God sees them. You can't go by somebody else's opinion about you. Everybody is going to have an opinion about something, and they are entitled to that. So, what you do is, you ask for your own understanding and then you carry your life out according to what God has showed you and how God has gotten in you.

[00:10:58] In Mississippi, it's difficult because of the stigma that's build around HIV, and a lot of people don't want to actually have that discussion about HIV. We have resources available, and all of the resources are placed in one area, one population, and that might be Jackson. And a lot of people outside of Jackson need those resources as well. So, if we can get those resources out to the rural areas of Mississippi, like the delta, north Mississippi, south Mississippi, where they don't have resources, and people can come and be educated and then have those resources there to actually protect themselves and actually go through treatment – we need those resources in the rural areas of Mississippi.

[00:11:46] And it is ... is very, very difficult for somebody to actually not have the transportation that, you know, to get to their doctor's appointment and stuff like that. so it's going to be harder for them to get into treatment and actually stay in treatment.

[00:12:01]

Artel: Could you share the focus of your advocacy and some of the reasons why this is such an issue for you?

McDonald: I wanted to lower transmission in Mississippi and become a virally suppressed state because I'm a black male; I am interested in love; and there's no telling who I might fall in love with one day. And to actually know how to protect myself, and actually know how to stay negative in a positive attitude – I would want our community to have this same mentality around HIV. It doesn't matter who you love; it doesn't matter who you're with; it doesn't matter what religious background you have – like, just understanding each other and knowing that there is love out there, and that's where I come in. Like, I know that there's love out there. I don't know who I might fall in love with one day.

[00:12:58] So, actually just knowing how to protect myself all the way around, protecting Marreo, is what I'm concerned about.

[00:13:07] And educating others in the process because I'm a passionate person about this subject, because it's so forced on the MSM community when other people are dealing with it. So, we need to actually get the message out to the population as a whole and say that, you know, this is something that we need to, you know, grab hold of; this is our community; these are our people; these are our babies that's being diagnosed with HIV, and they're not getting the education that they need to actually stay healthy. And so, we're losing them. Black people are already becoming extinct because of violence and because of prison and things like that.

[00:13:46] So, if we can grab hold to this and we can get this and actually lead our children about it – and that's why I wanted to do a culturally competent, culturally sensitive program for schools on education around HIV, because if we can grow out of it through our young people, then we have less worry about, like ... you know, we can just worry about getting people – older people – on treatment, and making sure that they're getting their meds and stuff like that.

[00:14:15] But if we can educate our youth about, like, HIV, then they can actually grow out of HIV.

[END OF INTERVIEW]