

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**

Micky Bradford and Amir Dixon

6-15-15

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.

[00:00:21] 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] Micky Bradford is a graduate of Georgia State University and works as an HIV/HCV Care Specialist for six clinical sites, as well as a training consultant in public health, housing and cultural competency. Micky has been selected as the 2015 LGBTQ Marshal of the Atlanta MLK March, is a Speakout HIV Ambassador, and a NMAC 2014 Youth Scholar. Her work focuses on the intersections of racial justice action, gay liberation, and sexual health.

[00:02:09] Micky is the co-founder of the Southern Fried Queer Pride Festival in Atlanta, whose mission is to elevate radical LGBTQ resilience through art and music.

[00:02:20] Amir Dixon is an award-winning writer, producer, filmmaker and activist. He has been named one of *Advocate* magazine's "40 Under 40." He is the founder of the Nu Nation Now Productions that focuses on producing media and print that aims to empower and inspire oppressed and marginalized people. In 2012 he produced the documentary, *Friend of Essex* that tells the stories of young black gay men around the country, which won the Black Pride Heritage Award for Film Excellence.

[00:02:49] In 2014, he followed up with *These Are Our Children Too*, that documents the lives of LGBTQ young people of color as they define family and community both in the traditional and chosen sense.

[00:03:02] Amir is the Program Director for "Connected Boston," which is a program of the Multicultural AIDS Coalition. Connected Boston's aim is to address health disparities and advanced health equity in the lives of black and Latino gay and

bisexual men and other men who have sex with men in the greater Boston area to reduce stigma related to sexual orientation, gender expression, and HIV status.

[00:03:24] Amir Dixon is the youngest board member of Hispanic Black Gay Coalition. HBGC is a nonprofit organization that seeks to inspire and empower Latino, Hispanic, and black LGBTQ Bostonians to improve their lives through activism, education, community outreach, and counseling.

[00:03:41]

Dixon: Hi. This is Amir Dixon. I'm from Boston, Mass.

[00:03:43] We are capable of saving ourselves.

[00:03:46] I use male pronouns, "him" and "his."

[00:03:47]

Bradford: Hi. My name is Micky. I'm from Atlanta, Georgia.

[00:03:50] Surely, the lives of black gay men are priceless and can be saved.

[00:03:54] ... and I use "she," "her" and "hers." You can't tell right now, but I'm sitting in a very cute dress.

Dixon: Yes, she is. A very cute blue dress.

Artel: I can affirm that.

[00:04:05]

Both: All I want to know for my own protection is, are we capable of whatever, whenever?

Bradford: And we're here today to talk about just our work, I guess in the arts communities. I met Amir at a film premier of his, oh, years ago – two years ago – two, three years ago? It was amazing. He completely unearthed this history of black gay men; talked about HIV; talked about social stigma; talked about so many different topics that really surround the HIV epidemic, and are the focus points of what we should be talking about when we talk about the health of our communities. And it really inspired me.

Dixon: Oh, wow, that means a lot ... that really means a lot.

[00:04:50] Well, I guess I'll go back a little bit about myself. So, I'm a filmmaker. My very first film I produced was *Friend of Essex*, which is about young black gay men. It's sort of looking at our space in the world in the context of the black community, in the context of the larger mainstream LGBTQ community, and how we see ourselves.

[00:05:08] And what was really important about that was, I also wanted to pay homage to *Tongues Untied* by Marlon Riggs, and also to amplify the voice in the art of Essex Hemphill. And really what I admire so much about Mickey, both as an activist, she centers art in all the work that she does, and that is something that I've always aspired to do.

Bradford: Aspire to? (Both voices/crossover/laughter.)

Bradford: Aspire? Regular, please. You were highly recommended. Stop it. Why are you playing this game, like you're not amazing? (More laughter).

[00:05:48] But really, the amount of influence that you've had, right, as a friend, as someone a part of this community, it's ... it means a lot. Because ... Because of that, like, I was able to start this festival called "Southern Fried Queer Pride" that's happening here in Atlanta, Georgia. It's our first pride festival that is centered around, you know, folks who are on the outskirts of the community. It really centers the music scene that's happening, the artists, artists living with HIV – folks who don't always get the spotlight.

[00:06:20] And so, it's important that I bring all of those things together. And I saw that in your film. I saw poetry; I saw film; I saw a narrative of a people navigating sexuality and dating and intimacy. It makes our lives beautiful.

[00:06:34] There's an important space for art in our work, especially in social justice work, that a lot of times get overshadowed by the research and the policy, etc.

[00:06:45]

Both (Spoken Word): We are capable of saving ourselves.

[00:06:46] I can't wait for an organization or foundation to release a study saying that black gay men are now extinct.

[00:06:53] I don't want to be among the dead.

[00:06:54] Replicable to drugs, sex and (t)rap music.

Bradford/Dixon:

[00:06:57] If a human chain can be formed around nuclear missile sites, surely black gay men can form a chain around Atlanta, Harlem, Hollywood, Wall Street, South Africa, each other.

Bradford: If we have to take tomorrow by blood, are we ready?

Dixon:

[00:07:12] So, do our S-curls, dreadlocks and fitteds make us ready – more ready than our fades and tims ?

Bradford:

[00:07:17] I'm not concerned about the attire of a soldier.

Bradford/Dixon:

[00:07:20] All I want to know for my own protection is, are we capable of whatever, whenever?

[00:07:29]

Dixon: I always tell people, art is a great equalizer. You can give reports and evaluations and data, but the way art makes people feel is where real change happens. So, that's sort of where it all comes from for me.

[00:07:45] And also, I think about our ancestors. I think of, like, other countries ... from New York, that was in response to black gay men wanting a creative space and being created out of a space of art as well in New York.

[00:07:58] You know, and I think about a lot of different things, and I want to make sure that we, as artists – as young artists – we are amplifying those voices and keeping that tradition going.

[00:08:05]

Bradford: I think for me it's been about collecting wins; it's been about showing my communities that, "Yes, we can win; we can win a campaign; we can win this change in our communities to have the center saved. We can have the space."

[00:08:20] Specifically, in Atlanta, it's, "Can we save the center? Can we have a variety show showcasing all the talent that is in the city?" And that's been successful for us; we've had that Sweet Tea Variety Show every month where we showcase queer performers, transgender performers. Those folks have gone on to compete in singing competitions. Those folks have gone on to win fellowships with the local arts communities that train young artists to do work. And if that is the ... the fruits of my labor, then I'm proud ... like, I've done the work.

[00:08:53] And so, I think that this is what it ... what it comes down to, because then folks see, "Okay, if that's possible, then what else is possible?" And that's what we need to get to, right, where we can dream about freedom in a way that is not constricted by what we already see in front of us every day.

[00:09:09]

Dixon: I completely want to second how much she said. For me, specially, I view art as a liberating practice. I've always viewed art as a way of taking on the whole self, right? We were talking about it this morning on our way here. Like, I have so many unfinished poems because I would get into a vulnerable space and stop it ... right? But how do I push past that and continue that, and how can I encourage other people to do the same thing and use art to both free themselves and to free the community, right?

[00:09:43] Again, like I said earlier, art is like a great equalizer, and I think that you can say a lot of things, but when people see something, they hear something, they feel something. Right? And art is a way for us to feel. And I think it's in those spaces when we start to unpack the feelings through art that we can ... they have change, right? ... effective change, right? A one way that we can do that.

[00:10:05] For me, as an artist, I've always felt like in doing advocacy work and community organizing, I've always centered art because I never felt like I saw other people doing it, right? So, I would look at my ancestors and see my ancestors doing it. I looked in Atlanta ... They were doing Atlanta, Philly, Chicago. But in Boston, where the center-of-everything Massachusetts is education, right? I've always wanted to bring art to my community where, for many of us, when they make school cuts, the first thing to go is music and the arts. Theater is the first thing to go, right? But how can we create safe spaces for folks?

[00:10:40] For a lot of queer folks, trans folks, folks of color, art is our safe haven, and I always want to make sure that in my activism that is center for me.

[00:10:50]

Artel: What do you see as these urgent issues, that you both been in advocacy for?

Bradford: I think you kind of touched on it earlier, right? We're quoting Essex Hemphill, Marlon Riggs, and Joseph Beam. These are black gay writers, poets, filmmakers. Joseph Beam said it pretty well: "I want to see that we are worth wanting each other."

Dixon: Exactly, exactly.

Bradford: It's not that young black gay men don't know how to take care of themselves and so end up seroconverting and becoming HIV+. It's that they are taught from the top down to not value themselves.

[00:11:29] And so, if we can fight against that, that's what will prevent HIV from becoming even further more of an epidemic.

Dixon: I totally agree. I totally agree.

[00:11:40] You know what? And I talked about it earlier, like, using art as a way to organize, using art as a way to bring people together and create safe spaces? Something that I'm really passionate about now is housing, because for many young folks, they have nowhere to stay; they have nowhere to live. And we can't talk about HIV prevention without talking about systemic issues in real deep-level things that go a lot of times unaddressed. You know? So, that's something that I'm really passionate about.

[00:12:09] So, I'm currently working on a project that I'll be interviewing a host of different homeless queer youth, displaced queer youth, capturing their stories and being able to put that in film. So, we're still like in the development stage around that. But that's a way that I've been able to use my art – that's I'm going to be able to use my art – to create effective change.

[00:12:27]

Bradford: For folks who don't know this ... I just want folks listening to this to look this up ... but if you're not aware, there's the case of Michael L. Johnson. He's a young black gay man who was recently sentenced to upwards of 60 years in prison for knowingly transmitting HIV to his sexual partners. And there's so much around that case. He's a young black man in a city predominantly white; rural. He found an outlet in the house ballroom community, which is primarily composed of black and Latino gay and transgender folks, and he found some family there. But when he would go to school, when he would go to his church, when he would go to any other spaces – these are spaces that are not gay, they're not black – what community did he really have?

[00:13:19] And there are other issues of access to HIV care and treatment, and so many other overlapping things.

[00:13:25] But what our response to this is, is, it is not just about HIV. It's about how are people able to care for themselves and value themselves.

[00:13:35] And so, for me, his sentence comes on July 13; that's when we'll find out how many years are you sentenced to jail for this?

[00:13:42] For me, it's important that I organize an action in Atlanta where we have public health officials, black gay men, people who care about this issue – the folks ... same folks who came out to World AIDS Day Atlanta, standing up and saying, “This is wrong; this shouldn't happen; and I won't let this happen again.” It's 2015. No one should be criminalized for transmitting HIV, and no one should be dying of AIDS – point black.

[00:14:07]

Dixon: I want to second that. This is where it comes down to, sort of, with that specific case. If someone is having consensual sex with someone, we have to understand that by criminalizing sex we stigmatize people wanting to get tested; we create barriers for folks knowing their status ... right? And then, in turn, we're not doing the work of stopping the transmission of HIV. So, I definitely want to ... to amplify that, and also Michael right now.

[00:14:37]

Artel: Micky, what led you to find art as a way to do your advocacy work and to express yourself, and also to be advocating in your own community?

Bradford: For me, it actually all started with the only community that I could find folks who look like me, talk like me, lived like me, and loved like me, and that was at school, actually. So, I went to Georgia State University. I was the President of Blackout, which is the LGBTQ students of color organization. And through Blackout I got into understanding that there are so many organizations that they're just dying to do great work with young people – young people who are gender and sexually diverse, and people of color; young people who come from extremely poverty-stricken backgrounds but have won scholarships to get to this place, and want to strive and graduate. And it just blew me away.

[00:15:37] And so, I was like, "I have to do this. Like, I ... this makes me feel better about myself and about where I am."

[00:15:43] And so, from there, I just did that. I started hosting our annual drag show and started experimenting with what gender means to me, and started getting into what it means to perform and dance and be something that is an agent of change, because our drag show was the biggest drag show – biggest student-run drag show in Georgia.

[00:16:05] And so, when folks come to the show, it's mostly straight folks and they've never been to any other drag show because they wouldn't go to a gay bar, and they come up and they tell us, "This has been an amazing experience; I had no idea the community was so beautiful and amazing; y'all are so funny and welcoming, and just thank you so much for putting this on and making this event accessible." I brought my mom; I brought this other person; you know, I brought my boyfriend. And it's just like, that ... that represents an avenue of change. And as soon as I saw that, I was like, "I have to act on this."

[00:16:38] So, I kept doing it, I kept doing it, and now here I am, a performance artist and activist.

Artel: Thank you, Micky.

[00:16:44] And Amir, what about you?

Dixon: I've always been an artist, you know, and I think I get it from my mother, 'cause my mother is a writer. I started off writing poetry. As a kid, I was always an introvert, and writing was a way for me to express myself. And in writing I was able to find community.

[00:17:06] But was the thing to make the sort of connection was that I always just knew, like, art made me feel something, and I always thought to myself, "Art must make other people feel something as well." You know. And I was introduced to, like, Audre Lorde, and I was introduced to Joseph Beam, Essex Hemphill, Marlon Riggs. I was introduced to all these like, amazing black queer artists that really wrote about things that I can identify with. And I wanted to continue that legacy, and I wanted to share my work with folks that look like me, that are like me, you know ... and again, where all of us use art as a liberating practice.

[00:17:46] So, that's what really got me to the connection between art and activism.

[00:17:50] I've always considered myself an "artist" because my activism is based in art, right, and art is based in activism.

[00:17:59] So, for myself, I definitely want to make sure everyone ... we can all stay in touch via social media. I "accept "everyone," so we can do that.

[00:18:11] And I really just want to send love to my family in Boston, my queer community in Boston that, when I moved to Boston they gave me family and they gave me community, and it's really a blessing.

[00:18:21] You know, to all my amazing artists and activists down south – 'cause I'm from Florida – who are doing amazing, amazing work ... I want to send them love as well.

[00:18:30]

Bradford: Where can we find you, Amir?

Dixon: So, I'm on Facebook, Amir Dixon [SPELLS]; Twitter, @amirnow. Let's all stay in touch.

Bradford: I guess I'll give a shout out to folks in Atlanta, the Counter Narrative Project for all of the work that was done for Michael L. Johnson; definitely my sister Arial, named in *Creative Loafing's* "Top 40 People Under 40" for her work with the Black Lives Matter movement; shout out to the folks at Southern Fried Queer Pride; all the folks I organize with – I love y'all. And the whole Atlanta community – I love y'all. So, yeah ... especially the gender non conforming girls.

Dixon: I see you, your nail polish is cute. Hey. [LAUGHTER]

[00:19:25]

Bradford: You can find me on Facebook, “Mickey B”; Twitter, @meekhilb – it’s a phonetic spelling of my name, “Mickyel B”; Instagram.

[00:19:38]

Artel: Thank you both so much.

Dixon: Thank you for having us. Thank you.

Artel: You’re welcome.

[00:19:43]

Both (Spoken Word): All I want to know for my own protection is, “Are we capable of whatever, whenever?”

[END OF INTERVIEW]