

**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**

**Travis Wise**  
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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] Travis Wise is the Program Manager for the DENIM program at Us Helping Us People Into Living (PIL). DENIM is the only youth-empowerment center in Washington, DC, and it provides a unique variety of services for young gay men of color. The services include the Brother 2 Brother support group, weekly confidential HIV testing, discussion groups around HIV awareness, and social justice issues that impact the LGBT community. The DENIM program also hosts an HIV+ support group by the name of “Common Bonds.”

[00:02:08] Travis has been in the field of advocacy for black gay men for 10 years. In his early 20s, Travis served as a peer mentor for a local LGBT youth program in Baltimore, Maryland, called “Kevin’s Room.” Alongside his childhood friend, Keith Holt, he became involved with various projects relating to HIV/AIDS and community service work at the Baltimore City Health Department.

[00:02:31]

Wise: Hello. My name is Travis Wise. I am the Manager of Young Adult Services at Us Helping Us in Washington, DC.

[00:02:39] Us Helping Us is a[n] HIV/AIDS services organization. We focus primarily with black gay men, providing a variety of services for those who are HIV- and those who are positive. We offer mental health case management; we offer support groups for individuals who are living with HIV. We also offer for individuals who are HIV- supportive services as well, like our group called “Brother 2 Brother.” It’s really just a group where men are kind of like ... self-help. We offer them a safe space to kind of just talk about issues pertaining to them as young black gay men.

[00:03:17] We offer a host of different activities to really support LGBT issue pertaining primarily for black gay men. But I'll speak for a moment about myself and ... and the work that I'm doing under my particular program, which is called "DENIM." DENIM stands for "Developing and Empowering New Images of Men." We're basically the ... the young adult portion of Us Helping Us, so what we do – which is a little different from what the overall agency does – with the program DENIM, we want people to get tested. We encourage people to get tested. We encourage people to be active in their healthcare, seeing their doctor regularly, and all those other things that are related to individuals being in a space to get quality healthcare.

[00:04:05] What's a little different from my program is that DENIM also offers some social support. So, we offer events and activities catered to create a sense of brotherhood in this community. One of the issues that a lot of young black gay men will let you know is that it's a little hard to find... friends, networks, networks of support in that community. So, that's what DENIM does a little differently than other organizations – we really provide social support and creating a sense of community.

[00:04:40] Seeing that, you know, we're here convening at Columbia University, talking about these issues, we speak about "community" and how important it is. One, coming from the larger African American community, we're ... we're already in a place where we may have challenges or dealing with traumas of the past history of this nation, and how that translate[s] and trickles down to black gay men who are a part of the whole community of black individuals.

[00:05:13] So, when we talk about community, it's really important that you foster a space where individuals feel comfortable ... where you foster a space where individuals feel supported. A lot of times this community can be so transient – people are going to work; people are going to school; people are trying to live their individual lives, but not really understanding the importance of having a

communal space where folks can support each other in and different agendas. Just as complex as the ... the heterosexual community is, you have individuals who do this, individuals who do that, individuals who do this.

[00:05:47]           The black gay community is the same. We have folks who are into fashion, but then we have folks who are into policy and legislation. We have folks who are just school kids. We have folks who just ... who do games – gamers. So, it's a lot of different layers of the community, and it's really important that, as a whole community we find a space to create this common thread and theme and a narrative around why support is important for the whole community of black gay men.

[00:06:16]           Historical and structural issues around ... You know, it's really hard to talk about structural issues without talking about the inequality and racism and institutional racism. It's really hard to have one conversation without having the other.

[00:06:31]           When it comes to building community, you need people to know that they're supported, but you also need to be able to advocate for individuals who need something that they may not necessarily know how to get. When we talk about structural issues, lack of transportation, lack of jobs, homelessness – these are issues that are plaguing young black gay men, and it's impacting their health, because if I get diagnosed with HIV today but I, one, don't have a job; I don't have a home – that pill is the last thing on my mind.

[00:07:06]           So, sometimes we have to take a step back and look at what else is going on with this person, because we can always scream, "safe sex"; we can scream, "condoms"; we can scream, you know, "Be engaged with your health." But if I've been out here for, you know, 6-8 months trying to find a job, nothing's coming through ... I'm staying at my mother's house and she['s] barely wants to speak to me because she is having issues dealing with my sexuality. You know, there are a

lot of other things going on that you really have to take into consideration when you talk about how you engage community to dismantle some of these obstructional inequalities.

[00:07:41] I come from a low-income, single-parent home in Baltimore, Maryland. Baltimore, Maryland, is a really interesting place. It's no place like it; it's really plagued with a lot of issues around the community: drugs, the gang and thug mentality; the street mentality. There's limited education; there's limited jobs. You know, so it's really that "crab in the barrel" kind of mentality.

[00:08:13] And I've always been a forward thinker. Even when I was younger, I've always been someone who questioned everything. I was that kid in school ... "Well, why? And what does that mean?" "Well, are you sure? Tell me more." You know, I was always that ... that kid, umm, in school.

[00:08:28] Then as I started to mature and started to really just see the world through ... I want to say "different eyes" or "brand new eyes," but really, eyes of someone who took time to see everything and observe what's really going on. You know, some people can be so consumed with their own lives and just what they're doing that they're not really paying attention to the big picture. You know, this is a big world that we're living in, and there are a lot of moving parts. And sometimes you have to really just see everything for what it is.

[00:08:59] I started in this work ... My best friend, who's been doing this work a little before me – he would always invite me out to his little HIV rallies. He'll be like, "Come pass out condoms with me, or pass our fliers." And I would come and we would do it.

[00:09:14] But then he invited me to this group called "Kevon's Room," and what Kevon's Room" was in Baltimore was kind of like a peer mentor program for

young ... for youth who were just coming out. So, 16, 17, 18 ... up to 24, maybe ... dealing with their coming-out experience and what does it mean to be young, black and gay.

[00:09:34]           So, I served as a peer mentor there, and it was my time there that really kind of opened my eyes to why this is important. I did struggle with coming out as a ... as a young man, but I was strong-willed, whereas the individuals that we met were not. And I felt that it was my purpose to really serve for them.

[00:09:56]           So, that's ... that's a piece of why I'm here. What I want to walk away with is a sense of empowerment. On behalf of the ... the 25 guys who are convening here, we all know that there's a mission to be achieved; we all know that we ... we want to serve our community as best we can, and I think opportunities like this really ... really benefit us because we get to hear different perspectives, different bodies of work across the country and what other folks are doing.

[00:10:26]           So, I think coming here and being a part of this process is really, you know, allowing me to do my job better and be a better servant to the community.

[00:10:36]           A message I would love for other folks – and this isn't just an issue for black gay men; you know, this is an issue for anyone who sees the potential and the opportunity to change something for the better. We live in a ... in a very interesting time in history right now. We have an African American president; Hillary's coming right behind him, it seems like. The social narratives on things are changing. Transgender issues are at the forefront. You know, this is a really interesting time in history, and what I want any young individual or anyone to do is see the potential for your voice; and sometimes, just your voice alone being that catalyst for change. It starts with one person, and I've always been one to say that it really can always take one. Sometimes people feel that they need a group or a

team. You alone – your voice – if it’s authentic and honest and pure, can change and make a difference.

[00:11:40] I would love for your followers, your loyal consumers of your brand, to check me out and check out my program on Facebook, “The DENIM Collection,” one word, and just keep up with some of the things that we’re doing in the Washington, DC, area. If any of your listeners happen to be there, please check us out. See some of the great work that we’re doing.

[00:11:59] And if anyone is interested in speaking to me directly, I can be reached on Facebook – Travis Wise. I’m very, you know, informal. You know, hit me up on Facebook; we can talk, have these conversation around how do we advance the ... the African American community, black gay men, and just the overall community as a ... as a nation and as a whole.

[00:12:19] So, I thank you for having me on. This has been really, really good, and I’m so grateful to be here.

[END OF INTERVIEW]