

6.2 UNAPOLOGETIC: THE YOUNG BLACK GAY MEN'S LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE

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Introduction

Young Black gay men have been invisible for centuries, an invisibility rooted in societal forbiddances, cultural silences and religious shields. The resiliency and hard work of Black gay leaders to remain visible and leave lasting imprints, and to prove they existed all along, continues to happen today. The cultivation of the next generation of Black gay men continues to evolve. We are now able to turn on the television and see a range of Black gay portrayals, like Jussie Smollett on *Empire*, Freddie Ross on *Big Freedia: Queen of Bounce*, and Julian Walker on *Being Mary Jane*. While the new 'Black gay' imagery seems to be going mainstream, the realities of modern-day Black gays are often filled with disparities and inequalities rarely talked about on primetime television or within our communities.

One of the major issues facing Black gay men around the world is a lack of physical space. We must often convene, assimilate and operate within other systemically oppressive spaces that were never intended for us. The lack of physical space isn't always exclusive to the social sphere, but frequently extends to our lack of physical homes. This leads many Black gay men to create our own spaces and in turn our own homes in which to meet, convene and live. This frequently occurs without our ever acknowledging our own homelessness or housing instability.

This case study of the Young Black Gay Men's Leadership Initiative (YBGLI) will demonstrate how leadership development can equip youth of colour, particularly young Black gay men, with key skills to combat homelessness and live successful lives. The development of these skills is facilitated by other young Black gay men, with skills including advocacy training, professional development, networking, leadership and mentorship opportunities. Having experienced similar disparities and inequalities, these young adults are shaping critical long-term survival techniques for their peers. This peer-driven model is easier for young Black gay men to relate to, since the skills are being taught by peers who share similar experiences. The stories of YBGLI leaders are featured throughout the case study, which also highlights the history of YBGLI and YBGLI Policy & Advocacy Summits.

YBGLI connected me to a network of individuals that ultimately met my needs when I was experiencing homelessness. I was introduced to the initiative after expressing interest in being involved in LGBT advocacy. At the time, I was new to the work of HIV prevention, and after travelling to Baltimore for the 2015 YBGLI Policy and Advocacy Summit, I was embraced by a group of young Black men who said they were my brothers, although this was the first time we'd ever met. It wasn't until much later that I understood what that would mean.

While experiencing homelessness, it became very difficult for me to access my HIV medication. I would miss doctor's appointments and eventually my doctor refused to write prescriptions. In reality, it wouldn't have made a difference if she did prescribe my medication, because I never knew where I would end up sleeping and whether my medication would be near me. It became very difficult for me to adhere to the regimen I had become accustomed to.

I was exhausted. My body, soul and mind were all affected by not having a stable place to lay my head each night, and I needed to remedy this issue fast. This is where my YBGLI brothers stepped in. The network that I was able to establish assisted me during that difficult time. My brothers gave me shelter and navigated me through the system, helping me to eventually secure my own housing.

Kahlib, Washington, DC

History of YBGLI

Birthing from the alarming rates of HIV among Black men who have sex with men (MSM), particularly young Black MSM, a community-driven initiative for young gay men of colour was formed. YBGLI is a national collaborative of committed young Black gay, bisexual, same-gender-loving (SGL) and other MSM between the ages of 18 and 29 that works to address the HIV epidemic in the United States. YBGLI is the only national initiative that is peer-led by young MSM of colour, with an innovative approach to curb the HIV epidemic amongst their peers by focusing on community mobilization, research, advocacy and leadership development. First launched in 2012, the YBGLI Policy and Advocacy Summit brings together young Black gay, bisexual, and SGL men from various parts of the U.S. to help them become better advocates and leaders within their communities.

Since 2012, four YBGLI Policy and Advocacy Summits have occurred across the country, in the epicentres of HIV in Black MSM (Washington, DC; Atlanta, Georgia; Baltimore, Maryland; and Baton Rouge, Louisiana), bringing emerging young Black MSM leaders together for a 4-day intensive personal development and community-building summit.

While YBGLI's work is centred on the disproportionate incidence of HIV in our community, it is not the only driving force of our work. We understand that HIV and the increased risk for HIV within our communities go hand-in-hand with other social determinants of health. Through our Policy and Advocacy Summits, we are able to expand the conversation to focus on key factors affecting young Black gay men. While an important task is training participants in those specific areas previously mentioned, we also concentrate on current issues the community is facing. In 2015, the main focus was to increase the visibility of young Black gay men and instill self-appreciation in participants.

Homelessness is a national issue that requires a collaborative approach led by community members taking a stand for outcomes to benefit those who are affected, the majority of whom are young people. Homelessness is a symptom of multiple issues that affect our communities nationwide, and it is an issue directly addressed by YBGLI's mission. Homelessness affects young Black gay men at alarming rates. YBGLI comprises a collective of organizing committee members working to find regional and national solutions, even if it means providing resources to our peers using our own means. The U.S. is under a tremendous amount of pressure with regard to the increase in racial disparity, inequality, homophobia, bullying and family rejection. These issues coexist in the experiences of young LGBT individuals of colour, and often result in homelessness.

For over a year, at the age of 17, I became homeless. I struggled with my sexual identity for several years, and coming out did not help with the process. The struggle ultimately put my family and me at odds, which landed me on the streets, homeless. I reacted to the situation the same way any average teenager would: I was left hungry, alone and feeling hopeless. During this time, I began hanging out with other LGBT homeless teenagers who were also struggling to survive on their own. It was at this point that I was introduced to sex work as an option for survival. I began meeting guys (older men mostly) to go home with, so that I could have a place to sleep and food to eat.

I have learned multiple things about myself as a result of attending the summit. The most valuable lesson for me is that I am worthy of a seat at the table. I work hard, and I have dedicated the last 6 years of my life to the LGBTQ community. Other people may have multiple degrees and lengthy resumes, but I have passion, love and experience on my side. My voice deserves to be heard, and I intend to speak as loudly as I have to in order to make a difference in someone's life.

YBGLI seeks to empower and assist young Black men on their journey to becoming leaders in both their community and the professional field of their choice. Many of our members have experienced homelessness and have dedicated their work toward finding ways to put an end to this problem. YBGLI offers the space for young people to come together, find common bonding experiences, plan, organize and take action. Homelessness will continue to be a priority issue for YBGLI until solutions are developed to keep our brothers off the street.

D'Angelo, Richmond, Virginia

When we talk about the homelessness of lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, queer, and two-spirit (LGBTQ2S) youth of colour, visibility and self-appreciation are often absent in the conversation. Visibility is often absent because of the stigma and stereotypes that are associated with homelessness. People then choose to opt out of being a part of 'that community.' Similarly, young Black gay men don't always instantly connect with the construct of the larger 'gay community,' and may not yearn to be part of it. By increasing the visibility and expanding the networks of young Black gay men, YBGLI Summit participants are able to engage with and experience other young Black gay men in a professional setting. This is something they may not see in their local communities. We believe that if we can show other LGBTQ2S youth of colour experiencing homelessness the different types of housing instability that exist, we will be able to better meet the needs of this invisible population that does not always identify as 'homeless.'

I remember a time when YBGLI didn't exist, a time when there wasn't a national movement to bring together young Black gay men. I was actually part of one of the first attempts in 2008 as a participant in the Creating Responsible Intelligent Black Brothers (CRIBB) fellowship through NAESM, Inc. Prior to

that, my outlook was limited by what I experienced and what I had access to.

After graduation from middle school, I got the ultimate graduation gift of being homeless at the age of 12. At the time, I didn't realize I was homeless because my sister and I ended up staying with my older brother in his one-bedroom apartment in Queens. I thought you were homeless only if you didn't have a 'home' to go to. Since my high school was in the Bronx, I had to wake up at 4:45 every morning to make the 2-hour-and-15-minute commute to school. I was often late, and at some point my grades started to suffer. There were days I wanted to give up. Days I didn't want to wake up. Days when I felt like it was too much for a teenager to deal with. My temporary living situation seemed to become permanent when I finally realized, by my sophomore year in high school, that I was homeless. I started to spend a lot more time in school and partake in after-school activities and clubs, often not getting home until after 10 p.m. I managed to pass my classes and graduate from high school.

While most college students wanted to live on campus for college, I needed to live on campus so I could finally have stable housing. My college years were my most transformative years, when I was able to gain my independence out of state. I started working in the field of public health during college. When I attended the first YBGLI Summit in 2012, it was the first time I gained tangible skills from a conference that could be applied to my everyday personal life. By the conclusion of the summit I knew I wanted to be involved with the organizing efforts. YBGLI was a way for me to take what I had learned along the way and instill that knowledge and skill set in my peers. If YBGLI existed when I was a teenager experiencing homelessness, I wouldn't have rushed the process to become an adult. I know for sure I would have made better decisions, because I had no one to talk to that I could relate to, and no one who could explain to me that things would truly get better with time.

DaShawn, Bronx, New York

YBGLI Policy and Advocacy Summits

The third Policy and Advocacy Summit was held in Baltimore, Maryland in March 2015, and brought together 70 young Black gay men between the ages of 18 and 29. The YBGLI Organizing Committee made sure the intensive 4-day leadership meeting was filled with learning, coalition-building, leadership training and personal development. While the 2015 cohort did not know what to expect, they were challenged to step outside their comfort zone, let their traditional shade guard down, and become vulnerable to strangers. Since we are often guarded and judged within our own communities, YBGLI makes it a critical point to create an inclusive environment where everyone is on the same level. In order to ensure that those invited are able to attend the summit, YBGLI removes the often cost-prohibitive registration fee and provides housing and transportation to everyone accepted into the summit. Meals and social events are also included in the 4-day summit that fosters fellowship and organic bonds among participants.

This organic vulnerability typically occurs early in the summit, setting the tone for the rest of the conference. As participants sit in a room full of other young professionals who are also their peers, the summit serves as a reminder that they are no longer alone. They have a community to support them. This was made possible in the 2015 Summit by the opening session, led by Dr. Robert Miller, who tasked participants to unpack and confront the pain in their lives. For many participants, this was the first time they were able to see they were not alone, and no matter how established someone seemed to be, they were also dealing with their own issues. We view this experience as a revolutionary act of love—one that existed throughout the 4-day summit as participants received positive affirmations about having been selected to attend the summit. Certain sessions focused on the work that participants had done in their own communities, while other sessions focused on the information that would help them personally and professionally in the future. Once the summit concluded, most attendees felt appreciation for the contributions they have made in their own communities, acknowledged that there is more work to do, and realized irrevocably that they are young, gifted and whole. The 2015 cohort experienced self-love and the opportunity to take pride in, and be a part of, the Black excellence that has continued to carry our community forward.

YBGLI Summit Reflections

Concluding the 2015 Summit, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences and explain what the summit meant to them. Below are four unique accounts of young Black gay men's experiences from across the U.S. as they explain the impact of the YBGLI Summit on their lives:

Love means seeing and embracing the humanity of all people because they deserve it now. I know that I struggle with accepting love and affection from others because I have an insecurity that unconditional love cannot exist. This conference was the first time that I was confronted with my fear of loving Black gay men, accepting their affection, and being okay with showing my own. I am always so guarded, even with the people I love the most. Even when I think I am giving all of me, I know that I am still guarded. These men helped me realize I can show my emotions, show that I care, show that I am scared, and be okay at the end of the day. There is no reason to withhold these feelings, especially with the community that has the ability to understand me the most. Without the lens of HIV/AIDS advocacy work I could not see the humanity of my community, my Black gay men community. Now those walls of oppression have been shattered, and I can see now that my world of isolation was fuelled by the missing love I needed from my community. There is no one flavour of Black gay men, and we ALL deserve love and support from one another.

Prentiss, Fairborn, Ohio

Through my experiences during this conference, I have learned to love me so much more. It was the last day when I learned my greatest life lesson thus far. All weekend we had been told how brilliant we are, but it wasn't until that last day that God gave me the power to accept that I was a part of the brilliance that had been exhibited all weekend. Often, we forget to give ourselves our own flowers, and in that moment I began crying tears of joy. I had found a new love within me and for me. And I thank all my brothers and sisters from the #YBGLI2015 Summit for helping me achieve this.

Christopher, Rochester, New York

The summit made me realize that I'm not as open as I should be, especially toward people with open arms. During the spirituality session, I was looking my soul right in the face and I had confronted everything. I discovered that being bullied throughout middle school and being ridiculed in my own home really took a toll on me, and I've been holding on to it this whole time. It's what has been holding me back from being vulnerable and trusting of others. But it's time to knock that 20-foot wall down. The summit knocked it down to about 3.7 feet. Meeting the lovely people at the summit helped me overcome that barrier. I feel like they are family, and that I can show some emotion and will be understood and comforted. And for that, I'm forever grateful.

Breonte, Charlotte, North Carolina

Before the conference, I had very little interaction or training with HIV advocacy. From my perspective, advocacy meant supporting those who were positive. I thought that a positive status meant bed-stricken days, restless nights and an untimely death sentence. At the summit I had to refocus my lens. I learned the key issue of advocacy is stopping the dramatic increase of the incidence of HIV, especially for Black MSM. That essential piece, the undying commitment to fighting HIV, and the unequivocal love for our Black brethren, was what I witnessed from each and every person at the YBGLI Summit. It was because of those ideals that 70 strangers from all over the country came together like family. My refocused plan is to leverage the knowledge learned and the strong network of individuals from YBGLI to better educate those at risk of HIV. Care begins with prevention, and care begins with me.

Therlow, New York, New York

2016 Policy and Advocacy Summit and Beyond

YBGLI utilizes a peer-driven model to develop the leadership skills of young Black gay men. As such, YBGLI populated the 2015 and 2016 summit organizing committee with 10 participants from previous summits. The collective dynamic of the organizing committee brought together expertise in various backgrounds including research, policy, community organizing, business development, program management, health services and

entertainment. In addition, this was the first time the organizing committee had five serving committee members who had previously experienced homelessness or housing instability.

Recognizing the national climate around issues of race, gender and sexuality, the 2016 Policy and Advocacy Summit had a strong focus on racial equity, arts, culture and social justice. The meta-goal for YBGLI's 2016 summit was two-fold: 1) To enhance the leadership and managerial skills of those engaged in pertinent advocacy on a local, regional and national level; and 2) To develop a movement that shines light on the structural, political and social realities that may hinder or impair the ability to succeed for young Black gay men.

Despite billions of dollars in federal funding for HIV prevention, and decades of HIV-related interventions and research, the disparity in infection rates for different populations—with young Black MSM being particularly affected—only seems to be getting worse. Much of this can be attributed to various social determinants of health, such as lack of access to services, institutional and structural barriers, and homelessness.

YBGLI can serve as a model for LGBTQ2S youth of colour facing other disparities, such as homelessness, through the initiative's direct focus on peer-led capacity-building and programming implementation. YBGLI works to bridge social justice platforms to begin to break down the silos that exist, through programming that provides gay, queer, SGL and other MSM of colour with personal and professional development, in addition to fostering a mentorship model to continue relationships after the summit ends.

Most importantly, every summit participant leaves with a larger network of access. The 2016 Policy & Advocacy Summit specifically showed that participants' basic needs are paramount to personal development. YBGLI raised over \$265,000 to convene the four previous summits. YBGLI has also provided housing and transportation during each summit to participants, approximately 300 young Black gay men to date, to elevate social and structural barriers.

YBGLI Summits highlight national efforts to bring together a community often classified as 'marginalized' to build organic coalitions and support networks. The summits continue to convene a diverse group of young Black men from various class and educational backgrounds. In addition, the summit continues to attract a range of men in various fields, including politics, finance, policy, higher education and health.

About the Authors

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DaShawn Usher is a health communicator and HIV prevention advocate, who has worked in the field of public health for the past ten years. He has extensive experience in HIV prevention services, recruitment, program coordination, community mobilization, and community engagement locally, nationally, and internationally.

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D'Angelo Morrison is a young Activist/Advocate from Atlanta GA, who has been working for over 7 years on issues that disproportionately affect the LGBT community. Within YBGLI, D'Angelo currently holds the position of the Regional officer, working towards expanding YBGLI's reach and impact with black gay men nationwide. In addition to his work with YBGLI, D'Angelo is also a member of the National Youth Forum on homelessness and he works at NAESM as the PrEP Coordinator.

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Kahlib Barton-Garçon is a proud Black gay unicorn who lives unapologetically in the intersections of feminine and masculine. They are an advocate for queer liberation within the Black gay community and feel that in order to achieve this, it requires a commitment to social justice across Black institutions; church being the first.

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D'Angelo Cameron, 23, is a community organizer for LGBTQ youth issues living in Brooklyn, NY. Originally from Philadelphia, PA, he is chair of the Young Black Gay Men's Leadership Initiative, a committee of young leaders who organize at the local, regional, and national level to address issues affecting their peers with a focus on HIV/AIDS.

