So Many Men, So Little Time

Tens years after the million man march recharged his life, Mark Tuggle takes stock of how far he's come

January 1, 2006 By Mark Tuggle

My father told me that everything in life is mathematical, but after my HIV diagnosis, I felt less than zero. 'Twas the week before Christmas, 1994: I was despondent, homeless and unemployed. I'd developed a nasty case of entitlement—the world owed me something, and somebody was going to pay! Worse, I was angry about being black and afraid I'd die of AIDS: alone, invisible, not cared for. A friend suggested I join the Million Man March, planned for October 16, 1995. Louis Farrakhan, spiritual leader of the Nation of Islam, convened it as a day of atonement—for African-descended men to address and own our unique concerns: apathy, education, health, incarceration, manhood anxiety, poor self-concept, racism, substance use, trauma, unemployment and violence. Whew.

I respected Farrakhan for his courage, passion and vision, yet I was troubled by his antihomosexual bias. Black men are expected to be aggressive, masculine, strong and unemotional. Why did I feel so naked? As a same-gender-loving man, I struggled with disclosure. Though I'd long been active in the black community, HIV carries a stigma. How would people treat me when I told them I have the big disease with the little name? But I had nothing to lose. So, in the spirit of Rosa Parks, I literally got on the bus.

As our Harlem group marched toward the Capitol, I met a handsome college student. Sean handed me a flyer outlining the march's initiatives, such as entrepreneurship, mentoring and voter registration. He smiled and said, "Brother, we got work to do." We exchanged hugs with brothers from Atlanta to Zaire.

Was this my idea of homoerotic paradise, or the affection I missed as a child? I was so happy that I almost forgot about my T cells, and I opened up about my sexuality and my status. On the ride home, I stared at the flyer and pondered how I could help my community. October 16, 1995, would be a day I'd never forget.

I soon joined a community-based organization, hoping to inspire others by my example. I added acupuncture, gym workouts, meditation and prayer to my weekly regimen of HIV positive support groups and therapy. The seed for transformation was planted, and today I'm healthy in body, mind and spirit.

On October 16, 2005, the march's tenth anniversary was commemorated in Washington, DC, as the Millions More Movement (MMM). The purpose was to unite African-descended men, women and children around core issues of economic development, health, political power, reparations and spiritual values. AIDS—a leading cause of death among black adults—was on the agenda, and I was there to support the movement.

I'd been serving the Black Men's Xchange New York (BMX-NY), an organization in Harlem that affirms, educates and unifies same-gender-loving (SGL) and bisexual people of African descent. MMM organizers boldly selected BMX-NY founder Cleo Manago to represent SGL people at the rally. He became the first African-descended SGL man to address a national black forum in a cultural context. Manago embodied our beauty and diversity. As he spoke, about 25 BMX-NY participants, many sporting colorful BMX-NY T-shirts, beamed with pride. I'd come 360 degrees over the past decade, proving that everything in life is mathematical. But we still got homework to do.

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