The Art of Speaking Out

Charles Stephens, the founder and executive director of Counter Narrative Project, talks with POZ about CNP's goal of amplifying the voices of black gay men and how HIV fits in with the movement.

December 21, 2015 By Trent Straube

Charles Stephens

How does CNP differ from other groups aiming to empower gay black men?
CNP is one of the few black gay men's organizations that is not centered around service provision. We are also intentional about being an intergenerational space. We are not membership based. However, anyone can get involved through participating in our Twitter chats, connecting to one of our webinars, following us on social media, helping to support the development of one of our public statements, or getting involved in one of our campaigns or projects as they come up.

CNP is committed, as your website states, "to art and culture as tools of transformation." Can you explain?
One of the most powerful ways to reach black gay men is through art and culture, and then engaging them in critical dialogue around the work. The Marlon Riggs film Tongues Untied can open up a discussion about how racism and homophobia impact black gay men's lives and identity development. The Adodi Muse work "It Begins" is a great tool to spark discussion about HIV stigma and trauma.

There has been some impressive work done attempting to better train and equip clinicians and service providers on how to reach black gay men. However, if they are not engaging black gay men's cultural production, they will be severely lacking in their understanding of our communities.

You still hear black gay men saying things like, "Tongues Untied saved my life." We have not even started to figure out strategies to build programming and advocacy efforts around these lifesaving tools and strategies.

CNP spearheaded support for gay wrestler Michael Johnson, who was convicted under HIV criminalization laws in Missouri. How does this case illustrate CNP's goals?
Our work with Michael Johnson taught me that many black gay men are very interested in fighting HIV criminalization. We just have to be engaged. Much of the HIV advocacy landscape in general, and certain HIV decriminalization advocacy, lacks an analysis that considers anti-black violence

and certainly the particular forms of structural violence that black gay men experience.

How would you place HIV/AIDS in the context of CNP's work?
It's an issue I can't not be engaged in, especially when you look at how black gay men are being impacted. But HIV is not central to CNP; building power among black gay men is central. I'm hoping that we focus on asking questions like, What does it mean that so many black gay AIDS service organizations have shut their doors? How do we as black gay men deal with and heal from our personal and collective trauma? How do we as black gay men institutionalize our HIV activism movement history? What does the clinical turn in HIV prevention and treatment mean for our community-building efforts? How do we support black gay men in their 50s, 60s and beyond, and also support younger black gay men?

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