A Love Letter to Black Gay Men of the Early HIV Movement

Their legacy elevates the humanity, health and dignity of Black gay men today.

February 7, 2019 By AIDS United

The following post is from Charles Stephens, the founder and executive director of the Counter Narrative Project. National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day (NBHAAD) is marked each February 7.

The Counter Narrative Project was founded as a love letter to black gay men who were on the front lines of the 1980s HIV justice movement. Though many of the historical narratives surrounding early HIV movement efforts erases the contributions of black gay men, we know that we were there, have always been here, and fought bravely on the frontlines then, as we do now. So from the perspective of CNP, National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day, is also National Black HIV Movement History Awareness Day.

Because our work: community mobilization, policy advocacy, training and media justice, invokes the legacy of our ancestors and elders, such as Joseph Beam, Marlon Riggs, Essex Hemphill, and Craig Harris, we feel a responsibility to share that legacy with our network members. It is also our belief that we can learn so much from the blueprints passed down from our movement founders, particularly as it relates to elevating the humanity and dignity of black gay men.

The Counter Narrative Project invests in black health in the following ways: (1) Advancing an analysis and understanding of health that recognizes the structural and systemic barriers for black gay men accessing healthcare. We resist narratives that place poor healthcare outcomes singularly at the feet of black gay men. (2) The Counter Narrative Project recognizes the importance of sexual health and wellness in the lives of black gay men, but we also believe that health conversations concerning our community, must not stop there. Health education must encompass health from a broader perspective including emotional wellness and trauma. (3) We confront and challenge public narratives that are toxic and dehumanizing to our community. (4) Finally, we believe that community healing has to be rooted in collective memory. To that end, culture and history are critical to the health and wellness of our community. Because our community has experienced such collective trauma, we must be intentional about creating spaces for collective grieving and restoration.

If black gay men are only objectified by research and reduced to statistics, situated in discourses

as if we have no culture, no history, and no humanity, then we will continually be failed by Public Health. Rituals of remembrance such as National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness then must serve as a platform to rethink our current efforts and boldly imagine more radical possibilities for how we do our work.

Charles Stephens is the founder and executive director of the Counter Narrative Project, a grantee of People Organizing Positively and the Southern HIV Impact Fund. This blog is part of the AIDS United campaign Honoring #BlackHistory Means Investing in #BlackHealth, to highlight partners and grantees working to address the persistent and disparate impact of HIV on Black communities in recognition of Black History Month and National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day. Learn more about how you can raise awareness and end HIV stigma here.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

http://beta.docker.poz.com/blog/love-letter-black-gay-men-early-hiv-movement