A Love Letter to the Women of NMAC

It is important to know who really makes things happen.

November 16, 2021 By Paul Kawata

I usually don't share internal issues at NMAC; however, recently I had the pleasure of promoting Kim Ferrell to be NMAC's Deputy Director for Operations, Alison McKeithen was promoted to be Assistant Director for Conferences, Shanta Gray was promoted to Senior Registrar and Meeting Planner, and Gabriella Spencer was promoted to be the Associate Program Manager. Women (cis & trans) are the heart and soul of NMAC. In a few weeks many of you will be at the 2021 United States Conference on HIV/AIDS and it is important to know who really makes things happen. Women make NMAC a force of nature and this is my love letter to them.

Women have always played a critical role at NMAC. Two of NMAC's founders include Rashidah Abdul-Khabeer (formerly Hassan) and Sandra "Ms. Mac" McDonald. According to the African American AIDS History Project "Rashidah has spent most of her life in Philadelphia, where she grew up amidst the social change and political ferment of the 1950s and 1960s. She began to volunteer with Philadelphia AIDS groups, which were primarily oriented toward white gay men, and became frustrated with their apparent unwillingness to develop specific outreach and education efforts for African Americans. In 1985 she founded Blacks Educating Blacks About Sexual Health Issues (BEBASHI), one of the country's first black AIDS service organizations."

Sandra Singleton McDonald, affectionately known as "Ms. Mac" is President and Founder of OUTREACH, INC., the first minority community-based organization established in Georgia to provide HIV/AIDS and drug treatment and prevention services to African American communities. Established in 1986 out of the trunk of her car, the agency has served more than 6,500 clients for over 30 years. Sandra has also consulted with theNational Football League, National Basketball Association, and the National Basketball Players Association.

Some amazing women of historical note have been on our board including NMAC's Honorary Board Chair Patti LaBelle. Ms. Patti was part of NMAC's HIV treatment education campaign on PCP. She lent her voice, talent and money to help build NMAC. The legendary jazz singer Nancy Wilson joined our board in 2005. Her concert to celebrate NMAC 's 20th Anniversary is still on YouTube.

Mrs. Coretta Scott King attended both USCA and our Community Planning Leadership Summit. It was at the USCA in Atlanta that Mrs. King hosted a reception where the Civil Rights Movement saluted the HIV movement. She brought icons from her struggle to the Opening USCA reception in order to build bridges and understanding about the linkages between our movements. Mrs. King

brought a voice of love and compassion for people living with HIV/AIDS at a time when too many other leaders had turned their backs.

Sometimes the rap on NMAC becomes about me and that is wrong. The agency is too diverse and too strong to be minimized in that way. I hold up these women staff, board, and community advisory members so that constituents can better understand why NMAC is successful. Women have always played a critical role at the agency. While there is not enough space to share everyone's story, here are just a small fraction of the women who make NMAC the agency our movement needs to end the epidemic.

I want the world to understand who has the real power at NMAC and it's not me. I am so grateful to stand with these women. Their support and critique make me a better leader. NMAC would not be NMAC without them.

Yours in the Struggle,

Paul Kawata

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