A Message From Phill Wilson as He Departs the Black AIDS Institute

"BAI is poised to deliver on a bold new vision of advocacy, mobilization, capacity building and delivery of direct service."

January 7, 2019 By Phill Wilson

Dear Friends,

Ecclesiastes 3:1-4 says, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose. A time to be born, and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to sow, a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to mourn, and a time to dance."

Twenty years ago, I called a few friends to ask them to help me actualize a dream that my best Brister—"Brother and Sister"—Reggie Williams and I had been working on for ten years. We wanted to start an organization to engage Black people in efforts to confront the AIDS epidemic in ways we had not previously been engaged.

We knew two things:

(1) Black People were dying, and

(2) Nobody could save us, but us.

Reggie and I knew when Black people understood the science of HIV—the epidemiology, the biomedical, and the behavioral—we would be better able to protect ourselves; more likely to get tested; more inclined to seek, adhere, and to stay on treatment; and less likely to engage in stigmatizing behavior.

With, as my grandmother used to say, "neither a pot to piss in, nor a window to throw it out of," the Black AIDS Institute (BAI) was born. Like Lin-Manuel Miranda's Hamilton, we were "young, scrappy, and hungry." Our mission then, as it is now, was to end the HIV/AIDS epidemic in our communities by engaging and mobilizing leaders, institutions, and individuals in efforts to confront HIV/AIDS in local communities with global impact.

Our small band has expanded to chapters and affiliates in 20 cities and 17 states. The Black AIDS Institute has been involved in every HIV/AIDS advancement over the last 20 years. As the only national HIV/AIDS think tank in the United States focused exclusively on Black people, we disseminate information, interpret and make recommendations on public and private sector HIV

policies, conduct training, offer technical assistance and capacity building, and provide advocacy mobilization from a uniquely and unapologetically Black point of view. This year, in partnership with St. Johns Well Child and Family Center, we started providing direct clinical care by launching "A Clinic for Us," a network of comprehensive care clinics providing Black centric care, community-based health care.

Last week, I attended my last staff meeting, packed up my office and walked out of the Black AIDS Institute for the last time as the organization's President and CEO. To be completely honest, I'm pretty sure I haven't processed all my feelings about that yet.

But this I know, in order for BAI to endure, we needed to plan for the future. A movement that does not prepare, embrace, and insist on young leadership is destined to fail. An organization that does not prepare for succession is a hobby. A leader who assumes he or she is irreplaceable is a fraud.

That brings me to the point of this letter. I want to introduce you to BAI's next President and CEO, Ms. Raniyah Copeland. I can't imagine a better choice to lead the Institute into the future. Raniyah is Beautiful, Bold, Brave, and Brilliant. She brings a vigor and vision to the AIDS movement that, given the current political environment, is desperately needed. Raniyah began working at BAI in April of 2008 as the Training and Capacity Building Coordinator. She worked her way up to a senior coordinator, a manager, and currently serves as the Director of Programs. There is no aspect of the organization that she does not know and understand. She is the right person at the right time for this job.

When I announced my plan to retire, ten months ago, I said, "BAI is committed to doing everything in its power to end the HIV/AIDS epidemic." A commitment to new executive leadership is the most important part of any commitment to prepare for the next generation of HIV/AIDS response in Black communities. That commitment is more important now than ever before. The time is right for this change. The Institute has never been stronger. With a strong board of directors, a young, smart, capable and committed CEO and staff, a reinvigorated body of ambassadors, spokespeople, and supporters; BAI is poised to carry out this change and deliver on a bold new vision of advocacy, mobilization, capacity building and delivery of direct service.

I have had a season, and what a grand season it has been. I would add "there is a time to stand up, and there is a time to step down." This is my time to step down.

But before I go, I have one final request. Raniyah cannot do this alone. She will need your help. In this season of giving, won't you please consider making a year end, tax-deductible donation to the Black AIDS Institute. We have a special opportunity. Viiv Healthcare has pledge to match every dollar we raise in this year-end appeal, up to $75,000.00. We are grateful for your continued investment in our future. The Donation process is fast, simple and easy. Online: www.BlackAIDS.org/donate, or by sending a text to "91999" and enter "BlackAIDS" in the message box.

For the last 20 years, the Black AIDS Institute has provided me with an opportunity to try to make a difference. And, for that, I am eternally grateful. As I close this chapter of my life, and BAI starts

the next chapter of its work, all I have to say is, “Thank you!” I am stepping down, but not giving up, or giving in. I believe in us. The day will come when this epidemic will be over. I am so proud to have been able to be a part of that process. There is a light at the end of the tunnel, we just have to find a way to get there. I look forward to watching, cheerleading, and helping in any way I can.

In the meantime, please take care of yourselves and your blessings.

Yours in the Struggle,

Phill Wilson

Founder

Black AIDS Institute

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