



How Do We Support Black Women in an Arena Once Led by Gay White Men?

August 14, 2023 By [Mark S. King](#)

In the early days of the AIDS crisis, as a young gay white man finding my way in the emerging HIV arena, I was King of the Mountain even if I wasn't conscious of it. I worked with people who looked like me, on behalf of people like me, at organizations founded and led by people like me. I operated in the same blithe state of privilege afforded me my entire life.

Working with other gay white men meant we behaved in ways that today would give nightmares to human resources personnel. We were sassy and sexual and entitled and inappropriate. Above all, we ran the show.

Sure, there were others—Black men and women, people of trans experience—working alongside us, but it was the gay white men who sucked all of the air out of the room. Our privilege was abetted by intense media interest in the AIDS crisis that centered us in every interview and photo.

Our GWM sense of entitlement became so deeply embedded that, when the HIV organization in Los Angeles I worked for was interviewing applicants for a new executive director in the late 1980s (our retiring founder was, naturally, a gay man), we were skeptical toward a finalist for the job who was—gasp!—a white woman.

“Are you sure you are comfortable working with gay men?” we asked her during a group interview with staff. She said yes. We asked her again, as if adapting to us was some kind of dare. “Yes,” she answered again. “I am comfortable with honoring the experience and contributions of people unlike myself,” and then added, as she surveyed us with a raised eyebrow, “but you do make me wonder...,” skillfully tossing our gay fragility right back in our faces.

That woman was Sue Crumpton, a supremely gifted candidate with a background in services for battered women, and she was hired. She taught me about feminism. She taught me about systemic racism in a way my white ears could understand. She served the organization with great distinction for the next decade.

But as years passed, white gay men got what we came for – the research and the services and the almighty medications—and then a lot of our rank-and-file abandoned the field, leaving behind everyone else to fend for themselves.

While this has contributed to the ascension of Black women in the HIV landscape, they aren't

simply filling a vacuum. That would unfairly diminish their resolute efforts to be seen and heard. They have fought for every inch of ground, every word of acknowledgment, every paid position.

The valuable dividends of diversity in our organizations should be obvious, but [Waheedah Shabazz-El](#), Director of Community Engagement for [The Reunion Project](#), has a simple explanation. “Anything you give a black woman, she multiplies it,” Waheedah told me. “It’s her nature. Give her groceries, she’ll give you meals. Give her a path, she’ll lay out a highway. Give her a seat at the table, she’ll give you solutions. Give her aggravation—that’ll also be multiplied.”

Waheedah also wants to make something clear about Black women in positions of leadership: “We are not interested in leaving white men behind,” she said. “When you serve Black women you are serving everyone. When you heal Black women, you are healing everyone.”

The practical result of this shift, through my work on various committees and planning groups, has been that the little zoom boxes on my laptop are largely populated by Black women. They’ve been patient teachers, gently guiding me away from my deeply rooted expectation to be in charge. They listen with empathy and intention and expect the same. I have learned, from more than one case of trial and error, the meaning of the acronym WAIT, meaning, “Why Am I Talking?” And when we’re together in person—and I will risk making a generalization here – Black women give the best hugs.

The most striking example of this demographic evolution can be found at the [United States Conference on HIV/AIDS \(USCHA\)](#), the gathering place each year for public health workers, community-based agencies, activists and people living with HIV/AIDS. I’ve been attending this conference since it was the Skills Building Conference in the 1990s, during an era when gay white men like me attended workshops led primarily by, you guessed it, other gay white men.

Not anymore, and not for many years. More than half of the registrants at [USCHA in 2022](#) were Black women, a reality reflected in everything from workshop presenters to the faces on the plenary stage. The USCHA theme this year, “A Love Letter to Black Women,” will celebrate and honor their stories and contributions.

This will not be a celebration of ending racial disparity. According to the results of a [Racial Justice Index](#) produced by [AIDS United](#) recently, plenty of work remains, such as real opportunities for people of color within the HIV field, and the lack of commitment shown by organizations to move beyond lip service and provide executive trainings and competitive salaries for Black and brown employees.

Many of the Black women being celebrated at USCHA this year will return to communities in which their contributions aren’t valued in the form of career advancement or wages on par with the guy who held the job before them. They will need the support of allies to change that.

And speaking of allyship, here’s a message for white folks who are still active in the HIV community, or new ones who are joining this movement, for whom this is an uncomfortable conversation:

If you are not centered it doesn't mean you are not invited. Check yourself. Have the humility and professional curiosity to show respect for the Black woman at the front of the room. Consider her your mentor as you navigate a world with evolving racial and gender dynamics.

If you're not sure how to make this change in your perspective, educate yourself. Listen. A lot. Do the work. Yes, it might mean, as [Olivia G. Ford](#) of [The Well Project](#) once told me, "lifting the rocks of our own history and taking a hard look at what lies beneath." Do it anyway.

I still make mistakes and try to remain teachable. It's the sincerity of the effort that will be noticed and build goodwill.

Black men and women labored for years in this movement without being centered. They contributed anyway. The real test, my friends, has always been if we are just as fiercely committed when someone else steps into the spotlight.

Mark

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