Bridge Builders Foundation Curates Black Boy Joy

We live in a society where love and vulnerability, especially between Black men is mocked or shunned. At a young age, boys are taught toxic behaviors and to put up walls, because any display of emotions and preferences not deemed as ‘hard’ are coded as ‘soft’, ‘bad’, or ‘not valid’.

These are the words used to introduce, in part, the award winning seventeen-minute short film, Black Boy Joy, that was written by Michelle Sam, directed by Martina Lee and released in 2019. The film, which took film festivals by storm, explores the nuances of three generations of men raising a Black boy with autism in an America full of hostility toward Black people.

Before a film, Black Boy Joy was a children’s book written in 2017 by Charlitta Hatch, the mother of a toddler who wanted the world to see her son and see joy, not a threat. And before a children’s book, Black Boy Joy was a hashtag resurrected by Chance the Rapper after he posted a picture of himself following the Video Music Awards in 2016. Though innocent enough, Chance the Rapper’s post seemingly became the invitation many Black people needed to flex their joy muscles.

Consequently, #BlackBoyJoy went viral. Twitter was instantly afire with images of smiles, laughter and joy—from Black men and boys. The love and vulnerability that the Black Boy Joy filmmaker said is often mocked or shunned, was on full display. Toxicity was replaced with transparency and hardness, that was replaced with happiness. A whole lot of happiness.

Happiness on Black men and boys then gave way to video conversations about what exactly Black Boy Joy means. And while some men had no idea, other men said, “Black Boy Joy is just being a Black man and being happy about it.”

Another said, “Black Boy Joy helped create a new narrative by challenging black masculinity and learning to be more open about their own fragility.”

Another Black man colorfully described Black Boy Joy as “what it looks like to be excited every single day.”
A Black woman inserted, “Black Boy Joy gives the humanity back to Black boys.”

And yet another Black woman commented that, “We need Black Boy Joy because we need to be the whole of ourselves.”

The whole of oneself; that’s what Black Boy Joy means to Bridge Builders Foundation (BBF). Being able to see, touch and influence the whole of the Black boy. Being able to help Black boys live from the fullness of their humanity is the ultimate objective. Giving Black boys permission to soar with a smile on their face and a sense of somewholeness in their heart is BBF’s way of dismantling society’s stereotype that Black boys are thugs. Though programs are plentiful and making something of oneself is top of mind, for BBF’s leadership, making sure that scholars know they are loved is also paramount. “We teach them how to tie ties. We teach them how to shake hands and look people in the eye. But we also have fun. Our STEM Program employs kids to go out and have fun. We give them variety. We understand that you have to have balance. We know that that’s pressure, but we’re not about the pressure. We’re about promoting possibilities,” says retired Director for Raytheon Company’s Space and Airborne Systems and current Bridge Builders Foundation Vice President and Operations Lead, Melvin Jackson, Jr.

In other words, in the same way that films, books and hashtags curate their Black Boy Joy narrative, community-based organizations are, too, curating a powerful Black Boy Joy narrative—one changed life at a time. And though very much aware of the very real challenges—broken families, learning differences, absentee parents, unresolved trauma—Black boys are confronted with on a daily basis, Jackson believes that it takes relationships, mentors, commitment, vision, family and passion to ignite joy in Black boys. Here he leaves us with his own BBF Black Boy Joy reflection: “What drives me are those smiling faces. The opportunity to see those young men come back and be who they want to be. Seeing these young men, scholarship recipients, who’ve gone through the STEM program and mentoring, seeing them standing on that stage . . there’s a lot of joy in that. It’s a visual. It says you touched someone's life and you hope they will go on to touch someone else’s life."

Like love, joy is the gift that keeps giving. And like everyone else, Black boys deserve to know joy, too.

It is December 2020, and a lot is different. For starters, COVID-19 unexpectedly took the world by force locking all of us into our homes, for the most part, since early March. Something else that’s different is the rapidly climbing death toll that is worrisomely pushing our healthcare system to the brink. Absent a comprehensive national strategy, COVID-19 went untamed and as of this writing has horrendously claimed the lives of more than 300,000 Americans.

Known for having many devastating implications, one implication that has captured the attention of health experts is the virus’ unambiguous impact on Black and brown people. “The pandemic is exposing racial disparities like few other events in recent U.S. history with initial data showing that COVID-19 is infecting and killing Black people at a far higher rate than any other group,” wrote Marguerite Casey Foundation, the philanthropic foundation nurturing the national movement of low-income families advocating on their own behalf for change back in April. A few months later, closer to home, Public Health Director Barbara Ferrer, echoed the same sentiment to the Los Angeles Times when she said, “Black and Latino residents and those living in lower-income neighborhoods have been among those hit hardest by the virus in Los Angeles County.”

As disturbing as this news is, those who’ve been on the healthcare frontline working to save the lives of Black and brown people long before COVID-19 showed up are not the least bit surprised by the way in which “The COVID-19 pandemic illuminated many social determinants of health and the concomitant disparately negative impacts in health and healthcare service delivery and access for Black and Brown populations.” These are the words of Cynthia Davis, Assistant Professor and Program Director in the College of Medicine and College of Science and Health at Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science. Professor Davis has
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worked in the Public Health arena for over forty years—making numerous historic contributions along the way.

Four years ago, Bridge Builders Foundation (BBF) honored Davis for her years of incredible work in the African American community in the HIV arena. Having been approached by our Community Health Initiative lead, Wesley Sholes, about working with our organization as we built out the programming around health care and health promotion, Davis was excited to come on board since we already had our hallmark STEM program in place. Because Sholes had the benefit of working with Davis on several medical field related projects over the years dating back to the 1980s, he was more than confident that she was exactly who BBF needed. A retired Deputy Director of Administrative Services with Los Angeles County Health Department, Sholes said, “Cynthia is the best at what she does, and she is well known for what she does.”

As a valued community voice, expert and leader, the asset Davis would be to the work of BBF was immediate. She informed our organization's work from the standpoint of helping us get our hands around emerging healthcare needs and deficits in the African American community overall. She guided us in putting together a comprehensive health education and disease prevention program to target school age youth within our membership as well as adults in the general African American community. With Davis’ help, in 2019, BBF received a grant from the AIDS Healthcare Foundation that allowed us to create a structured HIV/AIDS/STI primary prevention and risk reduction curriculum as well as develop corresponding informational literature and brochures.

Additionally, with so many families being directly affected by loss of life from the virus, Sholes and Davis felt it would be helpful to our participants, their parents, and even Omega Psi-Phi members to host a series of webinars designed to address fears, interpret media data, raise awareness about major health disparities impacting the African American community, and to discuss what the community can do to collectively and individually reduce some of these disparities. We were pleased to have the head of Charles R. Drew University's Geographic Information System join in as the special guest for one of the webinars.

Grateful to be associated with BBF, Davis had this to say: “I’m proud to be associated with them because the work they do is phenomenal. Leadership development for young African American males and females is incredible. The health professional workforce will need them.”

In the midst of all that’s different, what has remained unchanged is BBF’s commitment to educating as many Black and brown people as we can about their right to quality health care and their responsibility to be good stewards of their health.
About the same time, he met the Bridge Builders Foundation through their E.E. Just Youth Science Program. As Phillip recalls, “I joined the science academy where I did weekend community service and mentoring. Watching mature, successful black men focused on helping the community was a huge point for me. I needed to be part of this group. Bridge Builders helped me shoot for the stars.” Upon high school graduation, Phillip received a number of scholarship awards from community based organizations he was involved with including the Bridge Builders’ Presidential Scholarship Award in 2013.

For the last 10 years Forbes Magazine has published its annual 30 Under 30 list of young innovators on the verge of making it big. This year’s list includes Phillip Aubrey.

Phillip is the founder of the social savings app YUNIT. Targeting minority and migrant communities, the app uses accountability features like peer voting and social incentives that bring collaborative savings into mainstream U.S. culture giving individuals the discipline and structure to reach their savings goals. Phillips’ intellect and resourcefulness was evident at a very young age. During his freshman year at King Drew Magnet High School in Los Angeles, he developed an app to match up and hired college students from USC and UCLA to tutor his classmates, and created a thriving business.

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Phillip used these financial resources to attend Babson College, in Wellesley Massachusetts. He maintained his relationships with his Los Angeles area mentors who encouraged his interest in financial services. They helped him secure internships with SRO Corporation, a real estate developer and Nile Capital, a private equity investment firm. His senior year at Babson, he was selected to join the Babson College Fund, where he and 15 other students managed $2 million of the college’s endowment. After graduation, he worked as an analyst for Landmark Partners, a private equity firm in Connecticut. He came back to California and joined the San Francisco venture capital firm Initialized Capital before starting his own venture.