

HOT NEWSLETTER

January & February
2022

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“Mr. Meeks provided a unique contribution to the HIV sector and pioneered a new way of storytelling. Through art, he shared his story and that of his community by interconnecting aboriginal culture, HIV and health promotion.”

Anwernekenhe National HIV Alliance (ANA)



“Dialogue”

By

Arone Raymond Meeks

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge and pay respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people past and present as the traditional custodians of the lands on which we work.

Arone Meeks explained his beautiful artwork ‘Dialogue’ as a representation of communication between people on a verbal level and how they feel and respond to each other.

He goes on to explain the figures are linked by their hands and crosshatching. Crosshatching is a symbol for fertility and the earth.

The background depicts elements of the tropics, such as the reef, rainforest and coral spawning.

The kidney shapes within the figures represent the emptiness we may feel when responding to confronting situations.

Arone was a Kuku Imidiji man who grew up on the CAPE YORK and settled in CAIRNS.



Who is ANA?



ANWERNEKENHE NATIONAL HIV ALLIANCE (ANA)

AFAO-The Australian Federation of AIDS Organizations - member organization ANA is a First Nations representative body that works to improve the lives of First Nations people affected by HIV.

Find their resources and position statements on

www.afao.org.au and ANA websites

<https://usmobandhiv.org.au/>

<https://www.bettertoknow.org.au/about-us/>

I encourage you especially to download the resource

US MOB and HIV

Who is PATSIN? The NAPWHA {*National Association for People living with HIV Australia*} auspice for Positive Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Network (PATSIN) is a national membership-based group for Indigenous people living with HIV (PLHIV).

<https://napwha.org.au/about-us/patsin/>



PATSIN works within Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander communities and service providers to represent the interests of Indigenous Australians. It exists to provide an outlet for exchanging experiences and knowledge about HIV, and to advocate for change at the community level. PATSIN is committed to increasing education and addressing the high-level of HIV stigma within Indigenous communities.

NAPWHA and PATSIN recognize the diversity of the lived experience of Indigenous people and undertake to provide the best possible advocacy, support and information dissemination to all Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander PLHIV, by providing culturally appropriate peer support.

The 2 Spirit Program by QUAC- Queensland Aids Council

The 2 Spirits Program aims to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander gay men, lesbian, bisexual, sistergirls and brotherboys to increase control over and improve their health as a resource for cultural, social, economic and personal development and an important dimension of quality of life.

The program was established 24 years ago and provides sexual health education and community development to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

In 2017, funding for the project was ceased by the federal Health Department, amid growing rates of sexually transmitted infections among Indigenous communities.

Catherine King a local labour person said in a statement the 2 Spirits program had been doing “vital” work in far north Queensland for more than two decades.

This program has had well known successes in community engagement and education, most notably the introduction of *Condoman* and *Lubelicious*, the safe-sex superheroes,” she said.

King also went on to add, “We know that community-centred care works best, not only in helping to close the gap but also in strengthening communities and creating positive social outcomes. Programs like 2Spirits work with communities and individuals to break down barriers and deliver services that save lives. We cannot close the gap if we do not deliver effective, accessible and culturally appropriate health services to First Australians

Fortunately in 2019 May \$1.8 million in federal funding was assigned to the program, after funding for the program was axed two years before. King stated the funding would ensure the provision of four program officers, two based in Cairns and two in Brisbane.

Thank goodness this was restored and I have an article that showcases some of the work after this one. Please find information at these two locations to learn more.

<https://quac.org.au/programs/2-spirits>

<https://www.facebook.com/2-Spirits-121405214629054>

Whatever happened to Condoman?

I WONDER HOW MANY OF US REMEMBER
THIS CAMPAIGN.

I have always wondered the conception of this wonderful campaign, “Don’t be shame, be game use condoms!”

After researching I learned it was the brainchild of Aunty Gracelyn Smallwood – an Aboriginal Sexual Health Worker in Townsville. Thank you Aunty for a wonderful part of our HIV community’s history.

I am sure many of us remember the 1987, the Grim Reaper sexual health campaign that was launched Australia wide. For those who don’t remember the adverts featured the image of a grim reaper “bowling over innocent victims” in a bowling alley and spread images of fear and shame around sexual health and specifically HIV/AIDS. Many of us in the HIV community actually believed it was the catalyst for STIGMA in Australia and a part of our history we wish we could wipe out!

Whilst this campaign was very effective at spreading fear of HIV, it did nothing to empower people to make their own sexual health decisions, and take control of their own sexual health. The effect of the campaign was an acknowledgement that HIV was in the community, and it was something to be feared if people did not use condoms.

Thankfully in response to these adverts, Aunty Gracelyn Smallwood – an Aboriginal Sexual Health Worker in Townsville, recognized that the Grim Reaper adverts did nothing to promote sexual health within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Her fear was that the current sexual health education did not reach Aboriginal and Torres Strait people at a cultural level, and therefore was not appropriate for her community.

In 1987, Aunty Gracelyn Smallwood, with a number of other Aboriginal Sexual Health Workers in Townsville, worked on developing a sexual health resource which was culturally-based. Through their hard work, foresight and imagination – Condoman was created, by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This was in line with the MIPA Principles of Denver Colorado where HIV communities gathered and decided all work with PLWHIV should be based on the principle



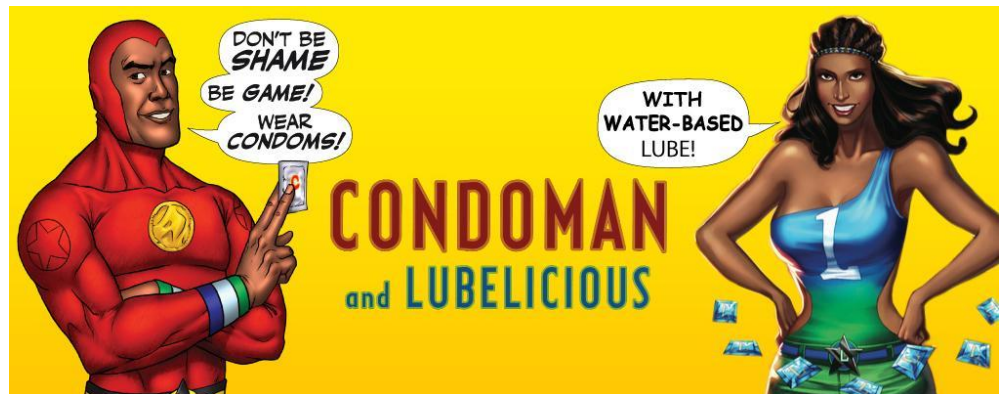
of Meaningful Involvement of People Living with HIV, which basically means nothing for us without us!

Condoman very quickly became an iconic figure for sexual health and the prevention of HIV/AIDS within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The message “Don’t Be Shame Be Game” has reached generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people because it was culturally-based.

In 2009, Condoman was relaunched by Brendan Leishman (Health Promotion Officer – 2 Spirits Project), with the support of Queensland Health and the Queensland Aboriginal and Islander Health Council (QAIHC). The image of Condoman was rebranded and updated. A range of resources were launched including key rings, comic books, posters, condom packs and a Facebook page.

The Commonwealth Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health (OATSIH) own the trademarked name “Condoman” and the original poster design, whilst the 2009 Condoman image/ design are trademarked to the Queensland Association for Healthy Communities.

Is this still being used, I am thrilled to say YES! Not only is it still a live campaign our hero has now a team of heroes and had a makeover to! Let me introduce the lovely Lubelicious.



Forgive my excitement as I only just stumbled on this and all I can say is
WOW!



What a great recourse to share and check out on <https://condoman.com.au>

They have yarning podcasts, information booths and floats, episodes of cartoons and resources to educate on HIV and STIs as well as attend festivals/host events and are well and truly keeping their MOB informed.

Now that is community in Action activism. Check them out and I encourage you to share this website.



ARTICLE OF A COUPLE LIVING WITH HIV EXPANDING THEIR FAMILY



By Dianne Nyoni

This segment with our Elders as I believe we need to not only pay homage to those elders who are still amongst us, but capture their stories and advice that we may learn from or choose to take-away as tools in our lives.

I am certain many of you would agree often our elders astound me how they have endured so much loss and yet can smile and laugh and be some of the most kind and giving souls you can meet. I think by interviewing in this segment on the topic of the month we can garnish great ideas, laughs and absorb their infectious lives they have created amongst a time of unprecedented change.

February is the month of love, St Valentine is in the air, so how better than to introduce you to a beautiful couple, Ja'Mel Ware & Alphonso Mills. They not only are true elders but also pioneers in the HIV community who brings us a beautiful love story, yes folks warning you may need to get the tissues ready! It is a tear induced read indeed, so please indulge in learning how love shows no barriers with a story that inspires us all. I'm sorry I'm giddy with glee as I love a beautiful love story so with-out further a-doo I am so excited to share this story, Written in February 24th by Darian Aaron enjoy.

Alphonso Mills & Ja'Mel Ware



In June, Alphonso Mills, 30, and his fiancé Ja'Mel Ware, 33, will become fathers. They shared the news of their expanding family in a short video posted on their respective social media accounts on Feb 22, marking the 22nd week of their baby's development. While Black queer couples are frequently raising children that are both biological and adoptive, especially in the South, Ware, who identifies as a queer trans-masculine man and was assigned female at birth is carrying the couple's first child. On testosterone for over a decade, Ware says he never imagined that he'd one day have to decide to stop receiving gender-affirming hormones in order to conceive, but that was before he met Mills.

Ware proposed in November 2020, during a trip to Walt Disney World after dating Mills for two years. It was a surprise affirmation of their commitment to each other that Mills later reciprocated with a proposal of his own.

The expectant fathers tell *The Reckoning* that expanding their family to include children has always been a topic of discussion from the very beginning of their relationship. And for Ware, the reality of birthing a child as a trans-masculine man has been filled with both joy and an incessant need internally, and externally from others, to further interrogate his gender identity as his body changes throughout his pregnancy.



"I know who I am," Ware says. "I am firm in my belief, in my understanding of who God made me and how I present myself in this world. But what does it mean for the world to see a pregnant man? For the world to know a man menstruates? What does that mean? I've been trying to figure out this language—how to explain to people the difference between sex and gender," he said.

In the United States, sex and gender are often incorrectly viewed as interchangeable; whereas sex has been traditionally used to place individuals in one of two categories based on their genitalia, gender denotes a range of identities that may not always align with an individual's established sex.

"There was just something about our connection that made me realize as long as I could do this, I would do it," Ware says.

"Ultimately, the concepts of gender and sex are socially constructed. This means that we as a society assign sex and gender to people based on socially agreed-upon characteristics," writes KC Clements in a medically reviewed article by Alana Biggers, M.D., MPH and published in Healthline.

“I have no issue with my sex. And I’m not speaking for all trans people. I’m speaking for myself because there are some trans individuals whose sex and gender must align, and that is their journey. But it’s never been a huge thing for me for my sex and gender to align,” Ware adds.

And because the pair are aware of how cruel society can be towards transgender people in general, much less a visibly pregnant Black transgender man, Ware has made the decision to isolate himself from the world for his own safety and to shield their unborn child from any potential negative energy.

“I don’t feel the need to put myself in a place every single day to have to fight for who I know that I am because the world is not ready to accept that one’s gender does not have to align with one’s sex,” Ware says.

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— KC Clements via Healthline

As his partner, Mills says it’s his job to offer daily affirmations of love and support, “whether you’re high or low, as Janelle Monáe says.”

“Sometimes it’s just about being there,” he said. “And then holding him when he’s feeling a [kind of] way or talking through stuff or just being an ear for him to get his emotions out. It’s given me the ability to expand my capacity and responsibility.”

And with the summer arrival of their bundle of joy created via natural conception to gender-fluid and trans-masculine parents, Mills and Ware are provoking all kinds of questions from everyone, including their immediate family about how they plan to raise their child.

Courageous Conversations

The couple waited until after the first trimester—around 12 weeks when the miscarriage risk greatly decreases to announce that their family of two was now becoming three. The pair broke the baby news by shipping framed ultrasound pictures and onesies that read, “You’re going to be grandparents” as gifts to Mills’ parents.

“We were tracking it like, okay, it says it was delivered. We haven't gotten the phone call yet,” Ware recalls. “What's going on?”

“My mother called me just crying. She cried for probably the first two minutes. She's excited. She and my father,” Mills says.

“I told a mentor and my aunt who was my mother's sister because it was important that she knew. She has always been an advocate for me. I felt okay telling her,” Ware said.

And then they were bombarded with questions. How did they plan to raise the baby? Who's going to be responsible for fulfilling the traditional roles of mother and father in their non-traditional queer relationship?



“To be honest, I can tell that it's a lot for them [Mills' parents] to kind of grapple with,” said Mills. “And my answer to them usually is, you know, this is a lot for us to learn. We're figuring this out as we go. And we're not going to be perfect, just like y'all weren't perfect.”

What I have asked of them as we figure it out is that you respect our decisions on how we choose to raise our child,” he said.

Ware and Mills are planning to affirm the sex their baby is assigned at birth, but will allow their child to inform them about their gender as they mature.

“People don't know that it's even possible. People don't realize that if both of us take care of ourselves, not just Ja'Mel, but if I also make sure that I'm taking my medication every day and I've reached the level of being undetectable, which I have, then that just even further protects our child and ensures that we are able to have a child that is not living with HIV, even though both of us are.”

- Alphonso Mills

“We don't know the gender, nor do we know the sex. We'll find out the sex when the baby is born and we'll raise them according to whatever society says aligns with their gender and sex until they tell us otherwise if they tell us otherwise,” said Ware.

While Mills says he feels the excitement from his parents, (he is the oldest of two, and currently the only sibling to give his parents a grandchild) Ware, who will deliver the first grandchild describes feeling ignored and neglected by some members of both families.

“When someone is pregnant, particularly when women are pregnant, there is a lot of fawning and care and checking upon. And I have not experienced that,” Ware said. “Now his uncle checks on me at least two or three, sometimes four times a week. I can tell that he's excited, not just about the baby, but about us growing our family. I feel like some relatives are just excited about the baby.”

Whether due to his parent's conservative Christian beliefs or the fact that both Mills and Ware are transparent about living with HIV, neither family seemed to be prepared for the possibility of the two men becoming parents.

“To live with the virus and know that the next generation doesn't have to go through the same struggles I had my entire life—it has been the biggest motivator for me. I know that our child will be HIV-free.”

— Ja'Mel Ware

“People don't know that it's even possible,” Mills says. “People don't realize that if both of us take care of ourselves, not just Ja’Mel, but if I also make sure that I'm taking my medication every day and I've reached the level of being undetectable, which I have, then that just even further protects our child and ensures that we are able to have a child that is not living with HIV, even though both of us are.”

For Ware, who was born with HIV, his pregnancy provides an opportunity to give his child what his late mother wished she was able to give him.

“To live with the virus and know that the next generation doesn't have to go through the same struggles I had my entire life—it has been the biggest motivator for me,” Ware says.

He adds that their unborn child has given him a new reason not to miss any doses of his antiretroviral (ARV) medication, to attend every doctor’s appointment, and to take care of himself.

“I know that our child will be HIV-free,” he said.

“I'm a thorough believer that when you keep God at the centre, he is going to bless you just as you are.”
- Alphonso Mills

Ware tells The Reckoning that he has received top-notch care from the medical professionals at Emory Midtown Hospital and is one of several pregnant transgender men that has been cared for by his obstetrician. He plans to release a resource guide for other pregnant transgender men in the near future.

Mills and Ware say they do not want people to see them as relationship goals but as an example of hope.

“I'm a thorough believer that when you keep God at the centre, he is going to bless you just as you are,” said Mills. “But you have to be who you are fully for him to bless you, anything else is not real. I hope our story inspires people to do that.”

I know we gotta see the baby pics! I will definitely do a follow up to this beautiful love story. I hope you enjoyed and remember anything is possible with love. Di

Editor’s note; Alphonso Mills uses He/She pronouns. For this article and with his approval, only one pronoun is used. Ja’Mel Ware uses He/Him pronouns.

Darian Aaron is Communications Director of CNP and Editor-At-Large of [The Reckoning](#). He is also the creator of [Living Out Loud 2.0](#) and a contributing writer for Edge Media Network. Darian is a member of the National Association of Black Journalists.

Jimi Hendrix – “When the power of love is greater than the love of power, the world will know true peace.”



Lifeline 13 11 14

Beyond Blue 1300 22 4636

Headspace 1800 650 890

Men's line Australia 1300 789 978

Multicultural Mental Health 1300 726 289

Crisis Care (Counselling, accommodation & food) 9223 1111

Feel free to call these agencies to talk or be referred for emergency assistance. HOT will be available over the holiday period to call also.

WORD FROM OUR CONSUMER ADVISORY GROUP

“Live life to its fullest, love, explore and know anything is possible with love.”

WE CAN DO THIS TOGETHER, STAY SAFE

We acknowledge the traditional custodians
of the land on which we live and work and
pay our respects to the elders past and present.



HOT Consumer Tick



