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BREAD AND ROSES: HOW THE ARTS CAN ENRICH AND SUSTAIN YOUNG CHANGEMAKERS

EXCERPT FROM KHARY LAZARRE-
WHITE'S ADDRESS AT 2016 GUILD CONFERENCE

*This November, the Guild presented its 2016 National Leadership Award to **Khary Lazarre-White**, executive director & co-founder of The Brotherhood/Sister Sol (Bro/Sis) in Harlem, NY. Lazarre-White co-founded Bro/Sis in 1995, at the age of 21. As a nationally recognized organization, Bro/Sis now provides comprehensive, holistic, and long-term support services to youth who range in age from eight to twenty-two. While the high school graduation rate in Harlem is 42%, 94% of Bro/Sis alumni have graduated from high school or earned a GED. Beyond that, 95% of Bro/Sis alumni are either enrolled in college or working full-time.*

"Those looking to serve youth in a holistic way need to place the arts at the center of their overall strategy," said Lazarre-White during his remarks at the Guild's Annual Awards Luncheon in Chicago. Only when young people are allowed to tell their stories in a supportive environment—and use their artistic practice to reflect on the world around them—will they be prepared to become agents of change and leaders in their community, he argued. Reflecting on the work of Bro/Sis, Lazarre-White challenged arts educators to build youth programming that helps students understand their social and political environment, establish creative tools for navigating their future, and find new ways to "see the diversity of the world as well as the singularity of the world."

The following is an excerpt from Khary Lazarre-White's remarks at the 2016 Conference for Community Arts Education:*

In 1912 in Lawrence, Massachusetts, a group of women, mostly immigrants, were on strike. They were striking for the rights that they felt all people deserved, and they framed this strike with words that still resonate over a hundred years later—that resonate throughout the labor movement, throughout the artistic movement. That is the theme of bread and roses. The idea that people of all backgrounds and, specifically, all economic backgrounds deserve sustenance for their body and for their spirit—bread and roses. I'd argue that bread and roses as a theme is something that can inspire so many of us in this room as we think about our work. [continued on page 7]

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BREAD AND ROSES: HOW THE ARTS CAN ENRICH AND SUSTAIN YOUNG CHANGE-MAKERS

What does it take to help young people develop into strong bodies but also strong souls? That's the core mission of The Brotherhood/Sister Sol. It is to provide intensive, comprehensive support to young people. Our theory of change entails providing support, guidance, education, and love—and we don't shy away from that word love—to teach them to form discipline and order in their lives. And then to create pathways by providing opportunities and access so that they can develop agency. We believe that this model—providing support, guidance, education, and love that provides opportunities for young people to develop agency—will help the population we work with 1) break cycles of poverty, 2) form a moral and ethical code on who they want to be as men and women, leaders in their community, and 3) to become social change makers.

Art runs through all of the work of The Brotherhood/Sister Sol but it is specifically framed within the theme of art and activism—art and social justice. So, the question in our work at Brotherhood Sister/Sol becomes, how do you use art and social justice to develop young leaders?



Arts Council of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma City, OK

We provide a rites of passage model that is comprehensive. It means that women are guiding girls and men are guiding boys on what it means to be men and women, leaders, brothers and sisters in their community. It's about spending six years with children as they are forming a moral and ethical code that will help provide the direction for their life. It's about helping them learn about issues of sustainability and the environment. It's about providing opportunities for them to spend a month with us in Ghana, South Africa, Brazil, Dominican Republic, and Haiti—the essence

of our rites of passage program. This month abroad gives them an opportunity to become connected to the culture and art that is both international and yet local—because it is theirs—to get them to see the diversity of the world as well as the singularity of the world. As we just heard from Kwame Scruggs in his Guild membership testimony, so many of our journeys are interconnected, and so much of our culture is interconnected. Recognizing this reality has to be part and parcel of our work as it's essential for the development of our young people.

At Brotherhood Sister/Sol we work with a population of young people called by our society "poor." That's the word that's used. However, we push back on that. If you look up the word poor, it says "without merit," "lacking in value," "having no worth." We reject the idea that our children are poor because they are born into economic conditions through no fault of their own. But instead we see the incredible beauty within them; the incredible ability to overcome within them. A central part of our work is to guide our young people from feelings of strangeness, from this initially alien reality, to an understanding of their connection to generations who pushed back against these realities, and to those currently struggling around the world. And so we help to open channels and pathways so that they can become social change makers.

How do we achieve that goal? We believe that a central part of that is done through storytelling. That if we really are to help break down the lines that currently divide us as a society, we need to be able to share our experience. We need to be able to highlight the interconnected nature of our humanity.

Chinua Achebe, the writer from Nigeria, framed this as "imaginative identification." It's a revolutionary and profound theory. What it means is that when you hear the story of another you don't just empathize, you don't just understand what the narrator is talking about, but you instead become one with the narrator. Her experience in poverty becomes yours. His experience as an immigrant becomes yours. The injustice that that person faces becomes yours. And I think that art at its best can do that. It can help us to identify with another's experience. And so the experience of the undocumented is not something outside of the room but is instead here in the room. The experience of the immigrant is here in the room. The experience of the child born poor, black, or brown, is here in the room. And because it is in the room—because it becomes our story—it brings the issue of social justice into all of our hearts.

We currently live in a society that is seeing unprecedented levels of inequality—whether it is the violence that we continue to read about on the streets of the Chicago, or the profound segregation in the public school system that we see in New York City. In New York City, 1.1 million children are in the public school system. Only 70% graduate. Of those that graduate, only 30% graduate college ready. That means able to go to community college without the need from remedial support. That is an abomination. That we as adults allow our children to be born into those types of conditions, to attend the schools they attend, without art programs, without the technology that they need, without the preparation to compete in society.

And so if we look back a hundred years to the idea of bread and roses, it provides some kind of guidance in terms of what our children need. They need sustenance for their bodies, for their minds, and for their spirits. And those of us at this conference know that art is an essential part of that. It is not an additional or augmented piece. It is not on the side. It is absolutely central to all children's development. So I think that whatever space we work in, whatever area of the country we work in, whatever specific approach we have, integrating the arts with comprehensive

youth development needs to be a primary focus of all of our work. The message needs to be that there should be no question of whether young people can have access to the arts. But rather it is a mandatory responsibility in this country that for young people's development as moral and ethical contributors to society, they must have art in their lives. That it is essential to their development. So when we talk about young people's safety in the streets of New York, or in the streets of Chicago, their safety is also about their spiritual safety—that they are able to grow and develop and become strong, whole adults. And that should be the goal for all of our children.

That is the message of Brotherhood Sister/Sol: that we will provide the comprehensive youth development work that leads to various channels for access and opportunity. We will be unyielding in that.

This comprehensive approach has a number of components. It means that we will provide a political analysis for our young people so that they can understand the conditions that they were born into. We have also decided that we will help bring our model to the field. Our organization has published five books of curricula. We train teachers, school systems, community based organizations, and we work with youth workers to help them integrate many of our principles. And finally—in an area that many nonprofit organizations shy away from—we are directly involved in the political and policy conversations of the day. Demanding that our schools are equitable. Demanding that the segregation we see in our school systems ends. Demanding that our children have access to high-performing schools and jobs. That activism is essential to our work. We will work with the young person but we will also seek to change the policy.

We venture into a number of different areas, but it all comes back to the same mission: providing support, guidance, education, and love to our children. If we do that, they will have the agency to seek out change in their own right. That's what our work is about and that's what our mission has been since its founding.

Finally, four themes that are central to our work are positivity, knowledge, community, and future. I think if you travel the world, whatever language someone speaks, people want positivity in their life, they want to seek knowledge, they want to have a strong future, and they want to do it within a sense of community. I think that if we do that and if we hear the stories that our children tell, if we really listen to them, that it will better us, and in the end it will better our children.

Resources

"A New World," Khary Lazarre-White, to be published in *A Crisis of Connection, Its Roots, Consequences, and Solutions*, NYU Press, 2017 - <http://www.kharylazarrewhite.com/>

Brother, Sister, Leader: The Official Curriculum of The Brotherhood/Sister Sol, edited by Susan Wilcox, 2013 - <http://bit.ly/2gZToCn>

"Unspeakable Hope," Khary Lazarre-White, Huffington Post, February 2015 - <http://huff.to/1vh3xYh>

About the Author

Khary Lazarre-White is the co-founder and executive director of The Brotherhood/Sister Sol (Harlem, NY) and recipient of the Guild's 2016 National Leadership Award.

*These remarks have been lightly edited for clarity and context

