Dialogue With DaBaby

After the rapper made stigmatizing remarks, HIV advocates wanted to “call him in instead of calling him out.” The outcome may surprise you.

November 15, 2021 By Trent Straube

Sticks and stones my break my bones, but words will never hurt me. Remember that saying we all learned as children? Turns out, despite the implied message of resilience, words can indeed cause harm—and destroy careers. Words also have the power to heal. Just ask DaBaby.

Our saga begins in July at the Rolling Loud Miami 2021 music festival, where the rapper let loose a string of stigmatizing remarks that went viral. Just a taste: “If you didn’t show up today with HIV, AIDS or any of them deadly sexually transmitted diseases that’ll make you die in two to three weeks, then put your cell phone lighter up!” DaBaby also disparaged women and gay men.

The clapbacks on social media arrived with a swiftness and included calls for concert venues to cancel his future appearances (many did). Some people, like Hamilton star Javier Muñoz, who is living with HIV, urged DaBaby to educate himself, adding, “I stand here as living proof that all you say AND imply are false. I am LIVING proof. Do better.”

On August 4, a group of HIV organizations with strong ties to Black LGBTQ people in the South penned an open letter to the rapper; eventually, over 126 groups signed on in support.

“2021 marks the 40th year of the HIV/AIDS epidemic,” the advocates wrote, “and the greatest obstacles in our work to end HIV are the compounded stigmas attached to anti-Blackness, living with HIV, misogyny and anti-LGBTQ attitudes and stereotypes, all of which are fueled by misinformation. It’s fear and stigma that keep people, particularly Black Americans, from accessing HIV prevention or care that White Americans have historically and continue to access more easily.”

The advocates’ letter included vital information, such as the facts that Black Americans accounted for 43% of new HIV diagnoses in 2019 (although they made up only 13% of the population), that daily pre-exposureprophylaxis (PrEP) tablets can keep people from contracting the virus and that those living with HIV who are on treatment and fully suppress the virus do not transmit HIV sexually, a fact often referred to as Undetectable Equals Untransmittable (U=U).

The letter also invited DaBaby to meet with them for further dialogue—“our goal was to ‘call him in instead of calling him out,’” they wrote—and he accepted.

In a post on a blog for the LGBTQ group GLAAD, the HIV advocates reported on the meeting's success and described DaBaby as being engaged and respectful. "DaBaby acknowledged that the HIV facts we presented—many of which he himself was unaware of—are what every American needs to know. Now, we wish for him to use his platform to relay that critical information to his fan base and encourage people to get tested and know their status."

Let's hope he spreads the word.

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