Like Mother, Like Son

HIV advocates Gwen and Davin Clemons, both LGBTQ ministers, got a shout-out from Lil Nas X.

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As the mom-and-son duo behind the Memphis-based, Black-led LGBTQ nonprofit Relationship Unleashed, Gwen and Davin Clemons have survived tumultuous times and are enjoying some well-deserved national triumphs.

“We live in the so-called Bible Belt,” Davin explains. “The Black church and the Black community have traditionally held a non-tolerant stance toward the LGBTQIA community. One of the reasons that Relationship Unleashed was founded was to help those trapped by religious dogma. Our goal is to liberate Black and brown people through education, empowerment and enrichment.” It’s an important mission, he says, because factors such as intolerance can foster self-hate among many minority LGBTQ folks, and this in turn leads not only to higher HIV rates—the South is the epicenter of today’s epidemic—but also to “other disparities in life that ultimately cause death to us spiritually, mentally and physically,” says Davin.

When COVID-19 forced the group’s impactful in-person events to go virtual, depriving members of one another’s healing presence, as Davin recalls, it took a toll on the nonprofit’s services as well as on the duo personally.

“COVID has been one of the worst experiences of my advocacy work,” Gwen explains. “I lost my mother (Davin’s grandmother) August 20, 2021, to COVID pneumonia. Although my mother was vaccinated, she was considered high risk with a host of comorbidities, and a large portion of my family members were not vaccinated, potentially placing her at risk. In Memphis,” she says, “there is a large population of AfricanAmericans who are not vaccinated and are dying unnecessarily.”

This wasn’t Gwen’s first experience with a deadly epidemic. In 1991, she lost her beloved transgender sister, Jewel, to AIDS, which led to Gwen’s calling in HIV and LGBTQ advocacy.

Gwen, a minister with an MBA who has worked in criminal justice for over three decades, identifies as a lesbian, and Davin, who has a doctoral degree in leadership in ministry, is a gay man. Since launching Relationship Unleashed in 2014, they’ve expanded their reach through The Unleashed Voice Media Marketing Firm, which has produced a radio show, a podcast and a national LGBTQ magazine. Earlier this year, when DaBaby made national headlines for homophobic and misogynistic remarks, Relationship Unleashed joined other agencies to pen an open letter to the rapper (see page 6). Stated Gwen at the time: “We are committed to…helping anyone learn the

facts about HIV/AIDS.”

Their tireless work is paying off. The nonprofit received a grant from the COMPASS Initiative—the name stands for “COMmitment to Partnership in Addressing HIV/AIDS in Southern States”—which is funded by pharma giant Gilead Sciences. And in the fall, when Lil Nas X released his debut album, Montero, he encouraged fans to donate to HIV causes in the South, specifically linking his track “Scoop (featuring Doja Cat)” to the Clemons’s Relationship Unleashed.

“This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for us,” Gwen says of the endorsement. “Lil Nas X is a true example of activism and philanthropy for grassroots organizations. [His] efforts to use his image and platform for political and social awareness should become the norm for celebrities.”

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