

Jean 00:00

Hello, everybody, I am downright excited for you to hear this podcast. You're about to meet Brandon Mack, a Black Lives Matter activist. I invited him because I wanted to know more about the inside of BLM, and not just what you hear in the media. Brandon is also a doctoral student at the University of Houston. One of his areas of interest is how gay men who present themselves as effeminate are shunned by other gay men, as well as the public. He even has a special term for that phenomenon. I talked with Brandon before the interview, so I know he will be fascinating. Here is Brandon. Hi, Brandon.

Brandon 00:53

Hello, Dr. Jean, how are you doing today?

Jean 00:55

I am fine. I am so glad we have finally been able to pull this off and have this discussion together.

Brandon 01:03

Same here.

Jean 01:05

I'm going to introduce you to our listeners. This is Brandon Mack, who is Associate Director of Admission at Rice University and Coordinator of Transfer Admission. He has a Masters of Education in Higher Education, Administration, and Supervision at University of Houston—my university—currently a PhD student there. And, he is Lead Organizer for the Houston Black Lives movement organization and this is why I invited him. I specifically wanted someone from BLM, and this is why Brandon is here. He says he focuses on the intersections of race, gender, and sexual orientation with research on the negativity related to effeminate gay men. And you have a special word for that. Would you please say that?

Brandon 02:09

Correct. The term is called effemiphobia.

Jean 02:10

Effemiphobia. And that's what happens when effeminate gay men are ostracized or shunned. Is that correct?

Brandon 02:20

Correct, it is when effeminate gay men are ostracized by other gay men within the LGBTQ+ community.

Jean 02:30

Oh, it's within the gay community?

Brandon 02:31

Correct. It can also be used to explain feelings of negativity towards effeminate gay men by other communities. But my research specifically focuses within the LGBTQ+ community.

Jean 02:45

Wow, that's fascinating. Do you find that it's internalized oppression too?

Brandon 02:51

Very much so, it is a kind of outward expression of the internalized feelings that gay men feel towards their own sense of effeminacy and their own sense of being able to freely display who they are, that kind of manifests itself into negative interactions that they may have with other gay men.

Jean 03:13

Okay, so I'm going to just stay on this for a minute before we go into your background. Is the behavior, because it is a behavior, is that something people learn, they feel it, where does it come from?

Brandon 03:34

So generally, where it comes from is the socialization that we get as children, associating certain things with certain genders and certain physical presentations. So, the understanding that boys are supposed to wear blue, for example, or that boys are supposed to like G.I. Joe versus liking Barbie, and that if you engage in anything that is perceived to be assigned to women, or is considered to be assigned to femininity, you are transgressing that behavior. And oftentimes, what would be done, especially in the past generations, would be that these individuals would be

punished and told that they need to act in the “correct way” that aligns with their particular gender.

So it has manifested itself into people's understandings that boys are supposed to act a certain way, girls are supposed to act a certain way. And if a boy acts in a way that is considered to be effeminate, the automatic reaction is we have to punish that behavior, because it means that they are transgressing their supposed gender presentation. The way it kind of manifests itself a little bit differently within the LGBTQ+ community, and specifically within the gay male community, is that it becomes a way of identifying someone's sexual orientation, because many people automatically assume that if you act in an effeminate way, you are therefore a member of the LGBTQ community or a gay man. You will have gay men who don't want their sexual orientation to be present or announced in the world. So, they will prevent themselves from being around effeminate men as a way of being able to announce their sexual orientation. And that has its own implications in how we interact with each other within the community.

Jean 05:28

So, you're saying there are some gay men who shun effeminate gay men because they afraid of that association? I'm not getting.

Brandon 05:40

That's exactly what I'm saying, is that you will see gay men shunning other gay men because of fear of association. So, for example, if they want to appear to the world as being a “typical” straight acting or masculine-presenting gay male, they will avoid associations and friendships and interactions with effeminate-presenting gay men so as to not cause that question about their own sexuality from other people.

Jean 06:12

I see. And I'm assuming that's hurtful.

Brandon 06:16

Extremely hurtful; it's extremely hurtful from an individual as well as a macro or larger community perspective. From an individual perspective, it becomes hurtful in the fact that you modulate yourself in a variety of different social situations, just out of both safety and also out of trying to be a part of various different communities, especially given the fact that that often doesn't align with the messages that the LGBTQ+ community often will put out there that we are affirming, we are welcoming. And so, that creates an individual confusion in that you say it's okay for me to be myself, but then when I'm around others who are supposedly like me, I'm still being asked to modulate myself.

From an individual perspective, that can be very harmful. From a community perspective, my argument is that it's even more harmful because it's preventing a marginalized community from coming together. Because it's like, we already have to deal with the ways in which we are perceived on the outside from other individuals who don't share our sexual orientation or our gender presentations and identities to now having to go and deal with infighting within our community because individuals want to maintain perceived heterosexual privilege, perceived masculine privilege, and things of that nature. And that prevents us from working on common issues that we all deal with, when people know our sexual orientation identity.

Jean 07:54

Whoa. So, do you have any idea what percentage of gay men are now in the closet? Do you have any?

Brandon 08:03

Unfortunately, I don't have a percentage of that in mind, often because they are in the closet. So therefore, they don't self-identify in terms of surveys and things of that nature. But I haven't seen any recent research or data to suggest how many gay men still do not self-identify with their sexual orientation.

Jean 08:24

What's your best guess?

Brandon 08:27

My best guess I would say, you know, 10% of the population is possible, given that the assumption is that 10% of the population identifies as LGBTQ+. So, I think that that's a fair assumption to make that there is probably an equal amount or number of individuals who also don't self-identify with their sexual orientation.

Jean 08:49

Okay. Okay. So, you know, the analogy of what you just said about gay men not wanting to identify as gay and therefore shunning, the analogy in the Black community about color, right? It's the same thing. Correct?

Brandon 09:08

Very same, and very similar.

Jean 09:11

So, why you don't go with this dark-skinned person, you might have ugly children, you know, whatever, right? It's exactly the same phenomenon.

Brandon 09:21

I would say that they're very, very similar in the fact that, you know, when you're thinking about the analogy that you're making that lighter skin is perceived to have a value that is assigned to be more positive, then having darker skin being assigned as being a more negative, you will see similar situations even within the LGBTQ+ community. But also, I would say, you will see the same thing assigned to society where things that are male things that are masculine, get a certain level of privilege, and things that are feminine or assigned female still get lesser privileges. So, it's a manifestation of the ways in which we have internalized gender and the privileges and status that we assign to gender.

Jean 10:14

Okay. So, let's go to your background. This is all fascinating. I really am so excited to have you here. Talk about yourself. Where did you grow up? Did you grow up in a segregated community, a multicultural community? Talk about how you got from there to here.

Brandon 10:37

Sure. So, I grew up in a small town, Lake Jackson, Texas, which is 50 miles south of Houston. I would say that Lake Jackson is a small town in terms of also having a relatively smaller percentage of African American Black individuals who live in Lake Jackson. I believe, currently, the percentage of Black families is about 5-10% of those who live in Lake Jackson. It is predominantly an oil-based town because many of the individuals who live in Lake Jackson work for the surrounding oil companies such as Dow Chemicals, BASF, and other oil-based companies.

1 Growing up, I was often the only Black student in my classes, often the only Black student in honors and advanced place classes. So, my growing up was predominantly surrounding that and the fact that I was an intelligent child, one who loved reading, one who loved history and wanted to be a part of those challenging curriculums, but would often get my education and my intelligence questioned. That happened pretty much throughout my entire K through 12 educational settings.

Until, of course, I was a senior in high school and was looking to go into higher education. And to be very honest, I was looking to leave the State of Texas, I wanted to go to a different environment. But I found Rice University, and loved my time of visiting the campus. I felt extremely welcomed by everybody that I met there when I was looking into which institutions to apply to.

And so, I threw my hat in the ring and applied to Rice, very much against the wishes and encouragement of my high school counselor. My high school counselor did not encourage a lot of my applications. And I applied to 10 institutions, and got into all 10 very thankfully, and ended up attending Rice University, it was the first institution that I heard back from.

Went to Rice, was there for four years studying political science and sociology primarily, graduated and then was very interested in going into graduate school and realized that I don't necessarily love the publish/research nature of academia, but I definitely love working in a higher education institution, and a job lined up in the office of admission where I was a senior interviewer during my senior year in college. And 12 years later, I am still working in admission, but along the way have decided that I do love research because I do think research is important in terms of documenting our stories, and documenting what goes on within our communities, that we can use research to implement better policies. And I got involved in activism and been an activist for 15 years, and I've worked in various different organizations. So, that's a little synopsis of the life that is me.

Jean 13:42

Well, that's wonderful. Okay, so I'm assuming you are gay, right?

Brandon 13:45

Yes, I am.

Jean 13:47

Okay, so fit that into the equation, when did you know? Just take us on that trajectory.

Brandon 13:55

Sure. I knew about my sexual orientation when I was six years old. The way I always remember it is that I was watching a documentary on HBO, which was the first time I ever saw two men kissing, and something just said there's a connection there. And so, over the course of just growing up, I realized that I wasn't really attracted in a physical way towards women, towards girls, that I was more attracted to men, but I never acted on it, especially growing up in a very religious household, and one that wasn't very supportive of the LGBTQ+ community. I really didn't get a chance to express myself in that way until I left for college.

And then even when I was looking into Rice University, one of the things that kind of made me know that Rice was a great place for me was the fact that they had LGBTQ+ resources in terms of magazines and books on open display in their library for people to be able to find. So literally during one of my visits, I was reading periodicals and reading books related to the

LGBTQ+ experience. And that's one of the other things that connected me to Rice. But also, even growing up being connected to historical figures like James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, and other individuals who were openly and unapologetically themselves, also gave me some courage to know that you can be yourself.

But I didn't fully come into my realization until I was in college and finally was in an environment that fostered the ability for me to explore and be my purely unapologetic self. As I often like to say, I took a 12-gauge shotgun to my closet door, so that there was no way for me to ever go back in.

Jean 15:53

That's so cool. Okay, so what's fascinating to me about your story is seeing the magazines open in full display, is part of what attracted you to Rice. One of the things that people talk about is how to create an inclusive environment. And so, I know of an organization now that has a lot of White people lining up the reception room, older White men; one organization, middle aged and older White women; another organization, no people of color on display, and internal debate as to whether or not that's okay, in terms of respecting their founders versus attracting people like you, who would look up and say, Okay, I see myself here. Do you have any thoughts about that?

Brandon 16:50

Absolutely, I think it's very important that you make sure, and that you put in the intentionality of displaying, everyone is welcome in that particular space. You can honor your history, you can honor those who came before. But you can also put in displays to demonstrate that you are in support, and that this is going to be an inclusive and welcoming environment. So, for example, the rainbow flag which is associated with the LGBTQ+ community that has even gone through an evolution to where today, we now have a progress flag, which is inclusive of the trans community with using the colors of pink, white, and teal. And then also the inclusiveness of Black and Brown to show that the LGBTQ+ community is inclusive of Black and Brown individuals.

Even using those particular iconographies can be a way of demonstrating that you are in support of individuals from all different backgrounds, even if your history is very, very different. But also, it's important that you're creating those opportunities and spaces for us to be engaged to know that our experiences are going to be centered and talked about. For example, at Rice University, where I'm the very proud sponsor of the Rice Pride Organization, which is a student organization, we're very intentional about making sure that our spaces are intersectional and welcoming. We do joint events with the Black Student Association so that students who sit at that intersection know that this is a space where we're going to talk about how things connect to the Black experience, but also connect to the LGBTQ+ experience. Because we do have individuals who sit at that intersection, and with the two communities coming together, they're able to see what brings them together rather than what only brings them apart or is very different from each other. It takes

that intentional action to do the work of making spaces inclusive and representative of everyone within that community.

Jean 18:52

Okay. I want to get to BLM, but I'm going to ask you this first. You just mentioned the gay pride group that you're sponsoring. You mentioned the Black student organization. What do you say to people who want to know why these groups have to be separate? Why can't we all be together?

Brandon 19:21

Here's what I say to everyone, is that there are going to be times where we have to have conversations where certain identities need to be centered. And when it comes to having those conversations, there is that need for separation. For example, if we need to have conversations where we're talking exclusively and centering the LGBTQ+ community, then we're going to have those meetings and those conversations. Everyone is welcome to come into that space but it's with the understanding that we're going to be the ones who are centered and it's going to be us who are leading the conversation about what's going on within our communities.

When we're having a conversation where it's overall issues, let's say for example, immigration, immigration is an issue that touches the Black community, and also touches the LGBTQ+ community, we can come together and have a centered conversation where we're talking about immigration as a centered issue. But we're bringing in our different points of view based off of our identities to have that common conversation. So in that instance, that's when integration is needed.

But there's sometimes – very much so – we know, especially as members of the Black community, where we need to have intentional conversations amongst us as a Black community, where we're going to be centered, and we don't need to worry about who's listening, or worry about having to explain certain things. When you engage in that kind of separation to have those central conversations, that's when it's necessary for it to be a Black space, curated, operated, and owned by Black people.

Jean 21:09

That's beautifully said. I held my breath as you were talking, because you encapsulated it so well. But you said Whites would be welcome, others would be welcome?

Brandon 21:22

In certain instances, yes, it would be an open and inclusive space. But then, at the same time, when there's a need, especially for marginalized populations, to need a space that is owned, operated, and is their own, if you truly are an accomplice to that community, you will respect that space.

Jean 21:48

I show up, I'm White, what does "respecting that space" mean?

Brandon 21:56

I would tell you, thank you so much for wanting to demonstrate your support. But this particular meeting is a closed meeting only for members of the African American community. So respectfully, you would not be able to be permitted to enter into this particular space. But we can talk about other ways in which you want to be engaged, if you are open to it.

Jean 22:22

How can you be open and inclusive, if I'm not allowed in?

Brandon 22:24

You can be open and inclusive by the objectives of your organization. But as far as the space, if the space is calling for there needs to be only certain voices that are centered in a part of it, it's once again, respecting that space. And that doesn't necessarily mean that goes against the objectives of the organization, it means that there's a need for this particular conversation to be held and conducted in a very particular way. And that those who identify outside of that, if they truly are about supporting, they'll support in the ways in which that particular organization, and that particular group sets up the rules of engagement.

Jean 23:04

I sort of equate it, if you are a teacher of yoga, and someone who specializes in food wants to come in and talk about food. That's not quite appropriate, because this is a yoga centered conversation.

Brandon 23:21

Exactly. It's like in this particular session, we're going to focus on the actual movements. Food is a part of overall health. So we'll invite you back to come in where we're having the overall health conversation, because then that's where we can talk about the integration of yoga and food and the relationship between the two.

Jean 23:40

Okay, so now you've mentioned the word accomplice. So, break that up for us.

Brandon 23:50

What many people opt in here is the term allyship. I for one am a firm believer that the time for allyship has ended. What I mean by that is that allyship is a very passive association. When someone is demonstrating that they are an ally, it means that they're demonstrating support. So, they're saying, I'm in support of the LGBTQ+ community. I'm in support of the Black community. And usually, that demonstration or saying that you're in support is where it ends.

What we need is accomplices who feel a deeper sense of connection to those communities, that they're actually going to take action when it comes to dismantling systemic oppressions and when it comes to addressing the issues that affect those particular communities. What I often tell people is this, your ally is going to be the person who goes to your protests, they take a selfie, put it up on Facebook, or any social media, and that's where it ends because it's a visual demonstration of support. The accomplice is going to be the one who's going to be there at the protest, make sure that they're in front of you so that in the event anything happens, they're there to be protective of you. But also, in the event that the action fails, instead of leaving, they're there to say, hey, let's clean this up, figure out what we're going to do together, and then go after that approach the next time, they don't co-opt the discussion.

So, going back to the previous example, your accomplice would be the one who if they came to the meeting, and you told them, hey, this is supposed to be a Black-only space there are other ways for you to be getting involved, the ally usually will get upset and just leave because they're there for the demonstration of support and to center themselves. The accomplice would say, okay, I understand, I respect that. I still want to be involved. What are the ways that you want me to be involved? It is because, once again, you have that deep connection, but you're still going to do the actions that are necessary to demonstrate that support and to lead to the dismantling of systemic oppressions.

Jean 26:07

I have read about allyship versus accomplice. And I brought out the word to some friends and they said, well the accomplice sounds like you're doing something illegal. Have you heard that objection?

Brandon 26:20

I have. And here's the thing that I often tell people, why is it that Black existence was considered to be illegal? Why was LGBTQ+ existence considered to be illegal? So, in a sense, accomplice fits right in because you're assisting individuals who have always been considered to be wrong, under society's main definitions, so we're just combining it.

Jean 26:43

I like that. I think of an accomplice as accompanying, that has the same route, you're willing to accompany us, be with us. Let's go to BLM. In case there is somebody who's been living under a rock in a faraway island for some time, please explain what is BLM? How it is organized, and why you decided to become a part.

Brandon 27:18

Black Lives Matter is fundamentally three things. And I'm going to keep this very brief. It is a – first and foremost – simple declarative statement, Black Lives Matter, period. There's no but and anything else that comes after it. And it was started because of the fact that the United States of America fundamentally has a problem with devaluing Black life. And it has manifested itself in a variety of different ways. One of the most in our face kind of ways that we have seen lately has been instances related to police brutality.

Three women created the hashtag Black Lives Matter; from there spawned the second thing that Black Lives Matter is, an organization. It is an organization that is dedicated to addressing the devaluation of Black life within the particular municipality, neighborhood, whatever entity that it is operating in. So, for example, you can see multiple Black Lives Matter chapters within a given city or in a given area, because they all approach it from various different ways. But they still can work together, or they can work independently, but still, they're operating within what do they feel is the best way to address Black lives mattering within their particular city.

For example, here in Houston, we do have a Black Lives Matter Pearland, and we also have a Black Lives Matter of Galveston County. And we also have of course, a Black Lives Matter, Houston. And it's not that we're separating because we don't support each other, we very much do. But it's a way for us to be able to address the issues that we're seeing within our specific communities. And also, we don't operate from a top down structure where, yes, there is a Black Lives Matter national organization, but we don't do a trickle down method where we have to wait for them to dictate what is the agenda, what is the way to operate, because they're the furthest away from the problem, we address it in the way that we feel is best to address it here in Houston with our understanding of Houston, Texas.

And then third, and finally, this is a movement, meaning that this is continuous. This is not just a one event thing, and we're done. We're about really dismantling the systemic oppressions related to the Black community. So that means addressing education inequalities, food insecurity, police brutality, but just overall the fact that there needs to be dedicated people who want a different system and way of living where really, we are all equal and that the Black life is truly valued and appreciated.

Jean 30:07

Wow. Okay, let's go and break out the organization. As you know, I'm a former community organizer. I'd love to talk about how to organize people in an activist setting. If Black Lives

Matter is composed of these individual organizations all over everywhere, how do you coordinate?

Brandon 30:35

We coordinate in a variety of different ways. For example, for us, as Black Lives Matter, Houston, there are five of us who serve as lead organizers of Black Lives Matter, Houston. We're the ones who are, you know, involved in the organization day to day, we're the ones who you're communicating with, we help to organize and address your particular issue, you can work individually with us one on one, we then collectively as a group together and then we activate and organize with the community on addressing those particular issues. And that could be utilizing our social media following, utilizing the individuals who are consistently working with us, but also working directly with communities and other organizations to address your issues.

Now, from a state, let's say we're talking about a statewide issue. There are other Black Lives Matter organizations that we also work in conjunction with in various municipalities. And generally, we're in communication with each other in a variety of methods, when it calls for that, literally it kind of goes up the chain, and we organize with them to deal with and address an issue that is statewide. We're also part of a group called BLM 10, which is comprised of 10 organizations nationally, that we work with on national initiatives. So, there's a variety of different ways that we organize. But because we have individual autonomy to operate Black Lives Matter, Houston, it doesn't limit who we can work with.

Jean 32:05

Who's in BLM 10?

Brandon 32:09

BLM 10 is currently comprised of Boston, Philadelphia, there's a couple of different New York chapters, we also have some West Coast representation. And we're always adding from different municipalities. But we all have similar guiding principles. So that's the key thing is, what are the guiding principles by which you work so that you have that mutual understanding and respect in terms of how you would approach an issue. That's what makes it easier to organize.

Jean 32:38

Ah, so you coordinate through social media and one on one contact with people, but you also coordinate through a shared set of values?

Brandon 32:47

Exactly.

Jean 32:48

What is the shared set of values?

Brandon 32:51

First and foremost, the shared set of values is that, it's about, we want to hear from the community to dictate the way that we respond. So, it's never us coming in and saying, this is the way to respond. The way that we come into it is first and foremost, hearing the community and saying, okay, what is the way that you all want to activate? We're here to help you think this through. But it's got to be community centered.

The second guiding principle is that this is not about fame, fortune, glory, things of that nature. It's about addressing the community impact. Because too often, people are waiting for that one charismatic leader, or that one person to get the spotlight. We're not seeking that, what we're seeking is actually how do we best help the community? So, that has got to be also a central guiding principle that none of us are doing this for the sake of spotlight, or for the sake of fame, because there are other individuals, other organizations, that's how they operate. That's one of their central guiding motivations for doing this work. If you don't align with that, generally, we're not going to be probably the ones you want to work with. And that's perfectly and totally fine.

And then the third thing is, is that this can be any number of ways that it can look, meaning it can be an education centered program, it could be actual mutual aid, it could be that we're doing a protest rally and march, we don't engage in something called activist checking, which means that we suggest that there's one way that's better than the other, it's about collectively, any of these opportunities and any of these ways of operating could be the most effective way and being open to that and not engaging in that checking of saying one is better than the other. So just a few of the fundamental ones.

Jean 34:41

You're mostly all aligned on those principles?

Brandon 34:45

Mm hmm.

Jean 35:12

Get really specific, name something, a recent action, or what has happened, BLM has done in the Houston community. So we can get real concrete so we can see what you do.

Brandon 35:37

Probably one of the most recent ones, because unfortunately, with COVID-19, it's been very hard to do a lot of direct action just because once again, we know that COVID disproportionately impacts the Black community. And we're not going to do something that's going to put us or anyone in jeopardy with respect to that. But there are some times where there is a need for a community to come together. And one of the most recent ones of that was in response to the verdict for George Floyd.

Immediately following the verdict for George Floyd, with Officer Derek Chauvin being convicted of his murder, there was a need and a call for there to be a rally just for people to come together. So immediately, we got together as an organizing team and decided, yes, we're going to do this. But we're also going to make sure that we have the PPE and we have the social distancing, to be able to bring this together. We immediately reached out to get a space, the space that we organized, that was at MacGregor Park, right in front of the MLK statue, we had individuals who were willing to provide us with water and with PPE. And we had enough to be able to secure enough PPE for as many individuals as we could provide, we know how to do social distancing. We have the protocols in place to ensure that people are at least six feet apart, but still able to come out. And then we put together a flyer, put it out there through our social media and let people know, if you're looking for a place and a space to be able to come together in honor of George Floyd, this is the place in space to do it. And we immediately got that out within about an hour or two after the verdict. Then we went directly to MacGregor Park, brought all the PPE, all the other measures that we had, including hand sanitizer, and individuals showed up.

Now, granted, whenever you do something of that nature, it isn't numbers that we judge our success by, what we judge our success by is, did individuals come out for what they wanted to come out for? And did they feel heard? We had individuals who came out because they wanted to express and be in community with other people who were feeling what did that feel like to finally see, at least in one instance, when police are being held accountable for the murder of one of ours? And then to be able to express, what do we do from here, because unfortunately, this is only one instance of accountability. We need more instances of accountability. So how are we going to now translate this into the entire system of policing, being held accountable for the ways in which they interact with the Black community of Houston, but also with the overall Black community. So, people got to express their ideas about that. They got to express that they wanted to see more support for the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, that they wanted to see accountability held here in the City of Houston, but also in the State of Texas. That's how we judge our success based off of, did we provide that platform? And were our individuals and people who came felt like they were heard? We got two yeses on that—successful event.

Jean 39:04

Well, what's fascinating to me through this whole conversation, Brandon, is how intentional you are. You've used that word centered at least four or five different times, you know, clearly what you're centering and what's outside of that. You're focused on what the goal is, outside of that, is outside of that. It's not dismissed. It's just outside of the focus. And I could imagine that's part of

probably how you got to where you are, because you knew, I'm heading here, this is where I'm going. Here is the question I wanted to ask you, I remember now. Periodically, I hear people say, where is the Martin Luther King of today? And I say, this is a different era. Talk to me, I'm not going to say more about what I said. I want to hear what you have to say about that. I'm sure you've heard this.

Brandon 40:15

Yes, I definitely have heard this and my response usually when I hear that is, where are the Ella Bakers of today? Where are the Bayard Rustins of today? Where are the Claudette Colvins of today? And the reason why I say those names is because those are names of individuals who were there, did amazing work, but unfortunately, are not as well known.

Today it isn't just about Martin Luther King, it's about where are all of us being activated and being a part of this movement? Because, it's going to take all of us collectively working but also independently working to dismantle the system that is racism. So, that's why I always tell people don't wait for the charismatic leader, you are the leader you've been waiting for and you don't need their blessing. You don't need that, you need your clear vision, your idea of how you want this to go.

And then along the way, you're going to find those individuals who are going to be supportive of you and who are going to listen to you, to enact the change that you want to see. So, yeah, we have Martins out there, we have Malcolms out there, we have Bayards out there. I like to say that I am in the grand tradition of James Baldwin in my own kind of way. But we rest on the shoulders of so many people who have done this work in a variety of different ways, whose names we don't know. But we don't always have to have that one central figure to be behind, we just have got to trust in our own visions and be committed to working individually but also collectively to achieve that ultimate objective of minimizing, lessening, and eliminating racism.

Jean 42:00

Okay, so eliminating racism. If you could wave your magic wand and pick one thing that would make a true dent, what would that be?

Brandon 42:34

If I could wave a magic wand? Now, this is always a fun thing to ask because it assumes all things else are equal, right? Or maybe or maybe not.

Jean 42:45

Now, you want the water to nourish the plant. You're choosing between the water and the soil and the plant food. You're choosing, what's the key thing.

Brandon 43:03

If it were me, I would eliminate the root. And when I say I'll eliminate the root, slavery never happened. If I was honestly going to use a magic wand, slavery never happens. And what I mean by that is the slave trade as far as Africans being shipped away from Africa to be a part of the hideous institution that is slavery. If I could wave a magic wand, that would be what I would eliminate because then we could see the further development of Africa societies and the trickle effect that that would have on our society in terms of we were one of the people who first developed education and having the first institutions of higher education in Timbuktu. We already had systems where we were kings and queens and valued ourselves. We already had these systems where we were growing our own crops, developing our cultures, and were very prideful in ourselves. So, if we eliminate the root of slavery, therefore the United States has to develop under a different system of valuation when it comes to if Black people made the decision, an active decision to come to the United States, then it's different because we're no longer under that same system and foundation that slavery created itself upon. So, that's why I say that.

Jean 44:32

Okay. I'm going to refine the question.

Brandon 44:36

Okay. Cool.

Jean 44:37

We're no longer time travelers, so we can't go back in the past, starting today what would you say?

Brandon 44:45

Starting today, if I had the decisions, one of the central things that I'd absolutely do is I would eliminate policing.

Jean 45:00

Eliminate policing?

Brandon 45:01

Policing as we know right now would be abolished and it would be a different system.

Jean 45:03

What would it be?

Brandon 45:05

It would be a system where we are allocating many of those resources towards policing would go towards addressing food insecurity, it would go towards addressing educational inequalities, it would go towards addressing the wealth gap between Black and Brown communities because many things that are considered to be criminalized essentially come from lack of resource and a fundamental devaluation of Black lives. I'm going to be very honest, do I find policing to be really a deterrent to crime? No.

Jean 45:45

Yeah, the research says that.

Brandon 45:47

Exactly. Police for the most part are there to investigate crime after it happens. So, for that reason, you can still put those resources towards the investigative part, but as far as the patrolling and all the other accoutrements that go to that, that don't really have the deterrent, that's a waste of resources. Instead, we could better, way better, address those issues by giving resources towards the things that fundamentally contribute to the problem of lack. So, in going with yours, if I had to wave a magic wand, it would be gone completely.

Jean 46:24

It would go on the policing?

Brandon 46:25

Yeah, policing would be gone.

Jean 46:30

What keeps you going, Brandon? It's clear to me that you've encountered a lot of obstacles and somehow or another you made peace with them and turned them into learning for yourself. What enables you to do that and why are you not more in despair? I know so many people in despair about what's going on now.

Brandon 47:29

What keeps me going is the fact that every single day I seek out to do what I can do. So that inherently keeps me going because it's always about what can I do to help dismantle the systems that I don't want to see? What keeps me going is seeing young people becoming more and more accepting of themselves. So, if I can create a world that facilitates that, I'm here for that. What also keeps me going is also something that keeps me not in despair, is because, you're right, Dr. Jean, I have seen a lot in my 37 years to make me feel despair. And, the simple fact is that I don't want anyone to ever have to go through that.

So, once again, if I can contribute to that not happening again, it's worth me doing what I'm doing and it's worth me going through what I'm going through. But also, it's my connection to history. I know I come from very proud people. I know I come from Black LGBTQ+ people who were doing this way before I was, who were more unapologetic than I was, who also faced bigger obstacles than I'm currently facing and they still were themselves. I come from Black people who faced slavery, who faced disenfranchisement, who didn't have the right to vote, who didn't have access to education, who were once again far, far worse off than me but still faced each and every day with pride and dignity and did not have despair. So, because I come from my ancestors and they didn't despair, I can't despair based off of this.

Jean 49:18

That's beautiful, and I feel exactly the same. I was talking with a client the other day who was talking about how she was treated unfairly at her job. And I said, did you watch Harriet Tubman's movie? And, she said yes. I said, listen to that song. We come from some people who've endured some stuff, you're not facing guns, so let's figure this out, this is solvable.

Brandon 49:49

Exactly. And here's the thing, it isn't like you've this steely resolve 24/7. Come on, we all are human. We have our moments where you get tired but at the end of the day have your moment to say that you're tired. But then, it goes back to exactly what you mentioned, re-center back to that central objective. Re-center back to that connection and understanding of your ancestors, and that gets you through those tough times.

Jean 50:15

Okay. So, Brandon, tell us how people can reach you and how to get involved with BLM if they wish.

Brandon 50:24

To be able to contact me you can follow me on all my wonderful social media, you can find me @TheBrandonMack on twitter and Instagram, as well as Brandon Mack on Facebook. To follow Black Lives Matter, Houston, you'll go to @BLMHOU and we're available on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram and you can always contact us at blmhou@gmail.com and our website www.blmhouston.com.

Jean 50:57

Great. Thank you. And, it's been a pleasure.

Brandon 51:00

Thank you so much for the honor and the pleasure.

Jean 51:04

What a conversation! Brandon kept me riveted. Here are my two major takeaways: first, I already knew that effeminate gay men are hurt by the disdain put on them by society. They're consistently ridiculed. What I hadn't thought about was, how hurtful it is to be excluded by straight appearing gay men. This is exclusion by one's own. As Brandon said, if we're supposed to be working together to advance our cause, why are we being excluded from within our own tribe? This so much resonated with me. Many of you know colorism and how it works in the Black community, dark skinned Black people are looked down upon by lighter skinned Black people. It's hard enough to try to foster social justice when we keep dividing ourselves from ourselves.

The other insight I had from Brandon was about BLM itself. I loved his explanation of how BLM is a slogan, an organization, and a movement. I really appreciated how he talked about the secret sauce of BLM as an organization; it's decentralized and is value based. The value base is what makes the decentralization work. Because it's decentralized, local units don't have to sit around and wait for headquarters to tell them what to do. Each area gets to take action according to what they see is going on locally. And the primary value is, this is an organization that is centering the needs and experiences of Black people. They have a clarity of focus that any organization would aspire to, think of Elon Musk, Steve Jobs, Dr. King. According to Brandon, this is not the route that BLM has chosen, instead they have clarity of purpose and values. I'm grateful to Brandon for this and the eloquent insights he brought us. I'll be thinking about this conversation for quite a while.