

DR. AQUIL BASHEER

My name is Aquil Basheer. I've lived in and out of LA County for the majority of my life. I do travel nationally as well as internationally, but where I would call home is Los Angeles County.

'In this type of work, you're usually chosen.'

I was born in the '50s. I was born before Jim Crow [ended] before certain laws were in place. Not only were we dealing with the type of violence that plagued the communities, but we were also dealing with systemic injustice from the municipal structure, from law enforcement, as well as racism and the degradation that was going on in our community toward one another. There were multiple plagues of violence in different forms and different degrees. I came up in a different era than most of the people in this work. I was a pioneer and still am a pioneer. I've been doing this work for over 50 years and I'm still on the ground as a practitioner [of violence intermediation].

In this type of work, you're usually chosen. You don't choose it. The actual year I can pinpoint was 1969. That's when I started in this work. This work was birthed from the social service and social justice movements of the mid- to late '60s, early '70s, etc. The core of what we were doing at that time was always community empowerment, community justice, and the eradication of the cancer of violence that was destroying the communities. From my perspective, most of us in that time period came out of the constructive gang environment, which were the social movements. Our goal was to combat the governmental racism, the police abuse, the oppression. Within that there was internal fighting where communities were fighting among themselves, but it wasn't to the degree of deplorable destruction. Our biggest adversary at the time was the governmental policies and reinforcers of those governmental policies.

Most of us had issues with our family back in the day because we were embracing new concepts and new ideologies that weren't embraced before. Our parents were integrationists. Even though my father was a hardcore revolutionary, they still believed to some degree in the integration concept. Ours was the first generation where we said, "We're not going to take what our parents took. We will arm ourselves and we will defend ourselves." And that's exactly what we did.

'We weren't allowed to be a kid.'

We weren't allowed to be a kid. "Kid" wasn't even in the continuum. At 17, 18, 19, our mindset was of 30 to 35 years old because everything was about survival, dealing with oppressive struggle, systemic issues of injustice. I saw a lot of my comrades murdered, put in the penal institute. These weren't just normal

friends; these were comrades that I had built, that were in the movement with me. These were like brothers and sisters to me. They were really family. I lost family members. I lost my brother to violence. I lost my sister to violence. All this was occurring simultaneously while the destruction in the communities was starting to truly manifest itself.

I was in the Black Panthers at the age of 15. We were committed to give our lives for the eradication of the degradation. We were willing to face this societal enforcement arm head on because the counterbalance to that was giving up freedoms, giving up rights, giving up integrity, giving up our respect. We were willing to die truly for what we believed in and that's how we went into our engagements. This is what people failed to recognize. We were young warriors in battle, and we didn't have the option of feeling helpless. We didn't have the option of having a safe space of resilience. That didn't mean we weren't traumatized. That didn't mean we didn't feel pain. But we didn't have time to languish in the comfort of that pain. We were basically ticking time bombs. And we were proud of it.

What that did in the process was [create a] hardness like never before. We were facing things that the average person would never even consider. Because of that, we were forced into a strength that very few had but simultaneously, we didn't realize how much inner turmoil and destruction was going on. We didn't understand what trauma was. We didn't have a rational definition like you have today. All we knew was that we were in pain, and we had to fight that pain with everything that we had. We understood violence. We understood death – and we understood it very well – but we didn't embrace this comprehensive concept of what we call “trauma.” As a matter of fact, had you admitted to some type of trauma back in the day, you would have been perceived as extremely weak.

With trauma, it spurts out later. It doesn't spurt out in the moment when you're going through it. You know, it's an incident on the street, something transpires in the store, a bad driver and then you shoot off at the hip and go crazy, whereas normally you wouldn't. We probably ended up putting a lot of blame and masking based on things that were going on, as opposed to the internal mechanisms.

'We were ready to give our lives.'

Most of my generation at that time came from the gang environment. We were the only ones that had the nerve to go out there and stand up against what we felt was a very oppressive, suppressive system. The difference was our gangs – the Businessmen, the Gladiators, Slausons – we were community advocates. We formed to protect the community from Jim Crow, to protect the community from the white gangs that were patrolling and attacking our communities. We didn't grow up as destructive gangs trying to terminate each other. We grew up as gangs trying to defend our community from the outside societal forces. There was a degree of unity. There was a degree of camaraderie. That's why I call my comrades just that, comrades,

as opposed to friends. It was much, much deeper than that. We were ready to give our lives, not only for the cause, but for each other.

We were also social activists that were developing social systems to move our community forward. We were creating ecosystems, though we didn't know it. We were creating collaborative formats to meet the needs of the people. Violence just happened to be at the top of that list and that's why so much concentration was on violence. But we were also composing social service programs to assist the community throughout the process and those were the type of programs that kept my purpose at the forefront. I just wasn't part of the Panther Party. I was a product of the Black Student Union. I was a product of the Nation of Islam. I was a product of four or five of the major, most notorious, revolutionary organizations at the time. It was a continuum of a circle of elders and peers that was constantly reinforcing.

We would have certain successes and we would have these major waves of death. Sometimes I would question, based on the amount of violence that was transpiring, *is what we are doing really bringing a purpose to these communities that we serve?* What we didn't understand at the time was that we couldn't silo our expertise. We would come in for certain challenges that were going on in the community and then build out some type of response, not realizing what we needed to put in place were systems. We didn't know that at the time. It took years for us to understand that. So, we would come in, attack an issue individually, get some type of resolve, and think we had a degree of success – not realizing that if we didn't put a system in place for others to use, all we were doing was temporarily stabilizing that thing. And then, when people were facing some of those same triggers again, we would get retaliation because we hadn't really gotten to the root cause of what was going on.

That was a process of years of learning. It wasn't that we just came up with these systems and everything came into place. It was years. It was decades of really understanding the mechanics and the methodologies and how all of this would come to fruition. I was probably 40-42 before I really started understanding what this true infrastructure looks like. If your stuff hasn't been tested, if you haven't been able to sustain any long-term consequential results, if you haven't been able to change the psychological impression and perceptions of what people have and operate with, you have not been effective at all, regardless of your little successes in the moment.

'We finally figured out we had to put systems in place.'

A little context. Back in the late '70s, we were hardcore into violence intervention. We had communities truly working together, doing proper things. Then in that '70- '80 period, we had the birth of the industrial prison complex. We had the eradication of most of the middle-class economic base for both Black and brown communities [in LA]. Then we had the Black exploitation films, which came in and

fostered this drug and pimp mentality. And then the worst thing that happened. We had the onslaught, the rebirthing, of the gang environment.

The gang rebirthing came because of the drugs. You had people becoming millionaires and they had to create some defense mechanism for that. People forget about the crack houses, which had to be protected. Crack here caused the reworking of the gangs because it was based on protection and being able to secure the monetary base. The reason that gangs flourished was because there was no economic system, because most of the middle-class jobs had been destroyed. And there was not the eldership. The prison industrial complex took that whole core of elders and removed them from the streets. You had youngsters operating off the cuff with no guidance from elders or anybody else, massive amounts of money to be made, and that's where your whole cycle came from in the '80s to early '90s.

In '92, we had the truce. We had the revolt meeting, which was a rebirthing of the violence intervention movement. The '92 truce was instrumental between the Bloods and the Crips. We had other truces going on across the nation. It was a rebirthing and a recommitment and now trying to move to a state of community and power.

There was too much of a mindset that relied on the termination of life. We did not know what more we needed to do. We didn't have those clear answers because we did have success. But we knew there was a vacuum and that's why it was so imperative that we figured out we had to put systems in place and not just deal with temporary stabilizing. We started to realize, in the early 2000s, the mental health component. We started to realize the component of mental redirection of systemic injustices simultaneously had to be dealt with while we were anchoring the stopping of violence. We had to deal with the exterior forces that were also causing people to become violent – stress, lack of hope, the whole gamut. That's when we started to realize it was an ecosystem that we were developing.

'Peace cannot be biased.'

Violence is always going to be here. The thing that we have to learn to do with violence is identify it, manage it, and control it. We're never going to eradicate it, but we can get it controlled to a point where it is not as a destructive force as it is to this day. But we've got to get people out of their individual perspectives, trying to prove that they are the ones with all the solutions. There are not going to be any real solutions until we realize the much larger unified expertise supersedes any one individual.

Do I say everybody that wants to engage and eradicate violence all have to come from the street and have a history of indulging violence? No. What I am saying is that peace cannot be biased. If you don't have that capacity, you have to surround yourself with people who understand that narrative and can truly speak from the victim's point of view, as well as the perpetrator's point of view. You have to at least be able to

drink from that cup of tea, either through personal experience or through related experiences of comrades that you have surrounded yourself with who can explain that to you. You cannot drive where we need to go from a strategical perspective if you don't understand the battlefield.

'The nature of violence is constantly morphing and constantly changing.'

Los Angeles County has put together a lot of the components that are needed to move the process of this eradication of violence. The County needs to understand that it is a true partner in the process and understand what that looks like. I don't think the County should try to drive anything. The County could be a good manager of what the work looks like and assist in creating true sustainability for the work. But the County has to let those that really know how to move the process, that can show that they have been effective in changing the narrative in their community, [lead this work].

The County is going to have to reach out to those individuals that might not have the capacity to sell their wares because they don't have the resource mechanism, but are doing the real hardcore, grounded work that has been proven. The County needs to be flexible and realize the nature of violence is constantly morphing; the system is probably going to have to be continuously changed.

The County has really got to stop depending so much on numeric data. So much of our work cannot be data qualified. There has to be the ability to show how our processes work, but stop having the numbers drive the success, as opposed to the real transformation and what organizations are bringing to the table. I'm talking about being able to show a continuum of systems that have been able to reduce, sustain and create the type of community ownership in a process that has really changed the community and the individuals in that community for the better.

The County has to stop looking just from the County perspective. There is this whole national movement that is really redesigning what our work is about. The County has to bring on more individuals who have that vision and work within that larger context, while still understanding the County paradigm. Working on a much larger regional perspective, that's where this work is going.

'Real leadership is temporary.'

We're at a very critical point in our work. I am truly happy that our work is being looked at as a professional entity. Those of us in the work are being respected much more than we ever have. Now one of the things we're going to do more than anything as CVI (Community Violence Intervention) practitioners, we're going to have to protect the gains and make sure that we continue to serve the people and serve these communities for the right reason. We're going to have to continuously do self-reflection and make sure that

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we stay in this work for the right reason. We're here serving communities because the communities have allowed us to. We always have to remember we're guests, even though we're from these communities.

Real leadership is temporary. Real leadership understands its role is to be replaced. And we've got to put those type of blueprints and structures in place for those coming behind us.

