

ELEVATING BLACK MALE VOICES ON BUFFALO'S EAST SIDE

An Evaluation of Community Power-Building Sessions

December 2025



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ABOUT MAGNUS DATA CONSULTING, LLC

Magnus Data Consulting, LLC is a research and data analytics firm dedicated to empowering organizations by leveraging data as a critical tool to boost efficiency and long-term sustainability. We partner with businesses, non-profits, foundations, and government entities that seek to measure, understand, and improve the impact of their

operations. More information about our work can be found on our website at <https://magnusdataconsulting.com/>

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Acknowledgment

This project owes a tremendous debt of gratitude to the facilitators for their incredible work and passion for the communities that they dutifully serve. Without their contributions, this project would not have been feasible. We would also like to extend special thanks to the Black men and youth who attended the sessions.

Their willingness to be open and vulnerable about vital topics related to improving Buffalo's East Side is deeply appreciated. Thank you to the John R. Oishei Foundation for funding this necessary work and laying the foundation for future initiatives.

INTRODUCTION

In 2023, the John R. Oishei Foundation shifted its geographic focus from supporting various projects throughout the Buffalo-Niagara region to focusing specifically on Buffalo's East Side. The new strategic direction, informed by community-based data, partnerships, and relationships, required the Foundation to show up differently by centering on racial equity, trust, and community voice to disrupt systems and build lasting change. To guide this critical work, Oishei developed a comprehensive framework centered on community power building, which outlines seven interconnected areas of focus that amplify the strengths and leadership already present in the community.

To inform and further strengthen the strategies in support of the community power-building framework, additional community voices needed to be heard, particularly those of Black men and youth. Consistent with the saying, "Nothing about us without us," the Foundation collaborated with three prominent Black male consultants, **Antoine Johnson**, **Najja A. Bouldin**, and **Daniel Robertson**, who each conduct impactful community work on Buffalo's East Side, such as creativity/change consulting, youth leadership development, and fatherhood programming.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Session Development and Evaluation

Through the partnership and funding provided by the Oishei Foundation, the three consultants each developed their unique sessions, united by the goal of exploring the strengths, challenges, and needs of Black men and youth on Buffalo's East Side:

- Johnson's session centered on the theme of Black masculinity and the promotion of positive fatherhood, aligning with various initiatives he has previously undertaken. Moreover, participants engaged in extensive dialogues regarding community issues they wished to tackle.
- Bouldin's session honed in on the importance of Black joy and creativity as a catalyst for change on Buffalo's East Side. Participants engaged in an immersive workshop in which they were challenged to develop creative solutions to issues in their communities. They were also strongly encouraged to redefine Black masculinity and its relationship to how joy is experienced as a form of liberation.
- Robertson's session integrated fitness activities, workshops, and discussions that prompted participants to explore themes like Black masculinity, Black joy, and the concept of personal success. Each consultant enjoyed considerable creative freedom in crafting their respective sessions.

Each consultant had extensive creative control over the development of their sessions.

Session Development and Evaluation (*continued*)

Additionally, each session was conducted by certified mental health practitioners and mentors, guaranteeing the psychological well-being of all participants. Magnus Data Consulting, LLC collaborated with the Oishei Foundation and three consultants to gather, evaluate, and integrate both quantitative and qualitative data from the three sessions. The sessions revealed several key themes:

- **Health and Wellness:** Attendees emphasized the importance of prioritizing health, whether by choice or by necessity. There was a focus on accountability, coaching relationships, and the importance of men supporting each other's wellness journeys.
- **Cultural and Personal Identity:** The struggle with cultural programming against showing vulnerability and joy, especially among Black men, was highlighted. Some participants reported struggling to identify positive emotions and often deferred joy until they achieved something new. The need for Black men to define their own joy, independent of external validation, was also emphasized. Joy was often tied to children and family moments.
- **Community Responsibility and Collective Action:** Attendees at the sessions emphasized the need for a "we are the cavalry" mindset, encouraging community members to take responsibility for all neighborhood children and restore historical support systems. The distinction between safe spaces and brave spaces was discussed, with brave spaces allowing vulnerability without fear of judgment.
- **Financial Literacy:** Some attendees noted that many people in their community lack the skills to manage their money wisely, even when their income increases. The lack of financial literacy was highlighted as a crucial factor in perpetuating generational poverty.
- **Fatherhood and Family:** Experienced fathers shared wisdom with those expecting their first child, offering advice on being present, supporting partners, and helping children understand/develop emotional regulation. The importance of leaning on one's community or "village" was highlighted.
- **Community and Systems:** A notable debate emerged regarding the best approach to working within existing systems versus creating independent Black systems to achieve prosperity. The need for both methods was acknowledged, along with the importance of mentorship, economic cooperation, and resource pooling.
- **Program Connections and Resources:** Some attendees highlighted the availability of valuable community resources, such as the Bomb Squad Boxing Club, which offers training and events to engage youth in a positive way. Additionally, fatherhood programs were noted for integrating mental health components and providing connections to housing assistance, further supporting community members in need.

Key Findings

The results strongly indicate a pressing need for enhanced programming in areas such as financial literacy, fatherhood, collective action, and both physical and mental wellness. Building on the achievements of the three sessions, it would be prudent to explore additional funding to amplify their influence on Buffalo's East Side. In particular, a sustained collaboration with the consultants is essential to create and maintain new engagement opportunities, including fellowships, cohort programs, conferences, and other initiatives that would broaden the scope of their efforts across the East Side. The survey results reveal a keen interest in expanding this type of work.

METHODOLOGY

Various methods were employed to reach participants, including social media outreach and word-of-mouth. Each consultant leveraged their extensive networks to ensure strong attendance at their sessions.

Magnus Data Consulting employed a mixed-methods research approach to assess the three sessions. This involved the systematic collection of notes during each session, which were later compiled and analyzed to uncover recurring themes. Additionally, the qualitative and quantitative data gathered from the pre- and post-surveys conducted by the consultants provided further thematic insights and basic demographic details about the attendees. These surveys were designed using Google Forms and shared with participants through URLs and QR codes.

SESSION I | COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS: VOICES FROM FATHERS OF COLOR IN BUFFALO

Background

Various methods were employed to reach participants, including social media outreach and word-of-mouth. Each consultant leveraged their extensive networks to ensure strong attendance at their sessions.

Magnus Data Consulting employed a mixed-methods research approach to assess the three sessions. This involved the systematic collection of notes during each session, which were later compiled and analyzed to uncover recurring themes. Additionally, the qualitative and quantitative data gathered from the pre- and post-surveys conducted by the consultants provided further thematic insights and basic demographic details about the attendees. These surveys were designed using Google Forms and shared with participants through URLs and QR codes.



Figure 1. Session attendees

Prior to the event, Johnson conducted a pre-survey among those who registered. This survey included fundamental demographic queries along with the question, "What thoughts arise when you hear the word joy?" The session led by Johnson kicked off with a 40-minute boxing workout, encouraging fathers to engage to the best of their physical capabilities. Following this, breakfast was provided for the attendees, who enjoyed their meal while being oriented to the workshop and discussion. During this orientation, participants were briefed on the Oishei Foundation's new strategic focus and its significance to the session.

Background (*continued*)



Figure 2. Reginald Cox facilitating the discussion.

The workshop and discussion were led by Johnson and Reginald Cox, the CEO and Founder of Fatherhood Connection, an organization committed to empowering fathers to take a more active role in their children's lives. Participants were invited to delve deeply into the challenges and obstacles they encounter as fathers, with a particular focus on the experiences of Black fathers. After the workshop and dialogue wrapped up, attendees filled out a post-survey to reflect on their experiences, key insights, and their willingness to engage further in such initiatives. Upon completing the surveys, participants received gift cards as a gesture of gratitude for their involvement.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Demographics

31 people registered and 36 attended the session. All attendees were Black or African American with ages ranging from 16 to 60+.

Pre-Survey Results

A total of 33 individuals finished the pre-survey. Below are the key insights:

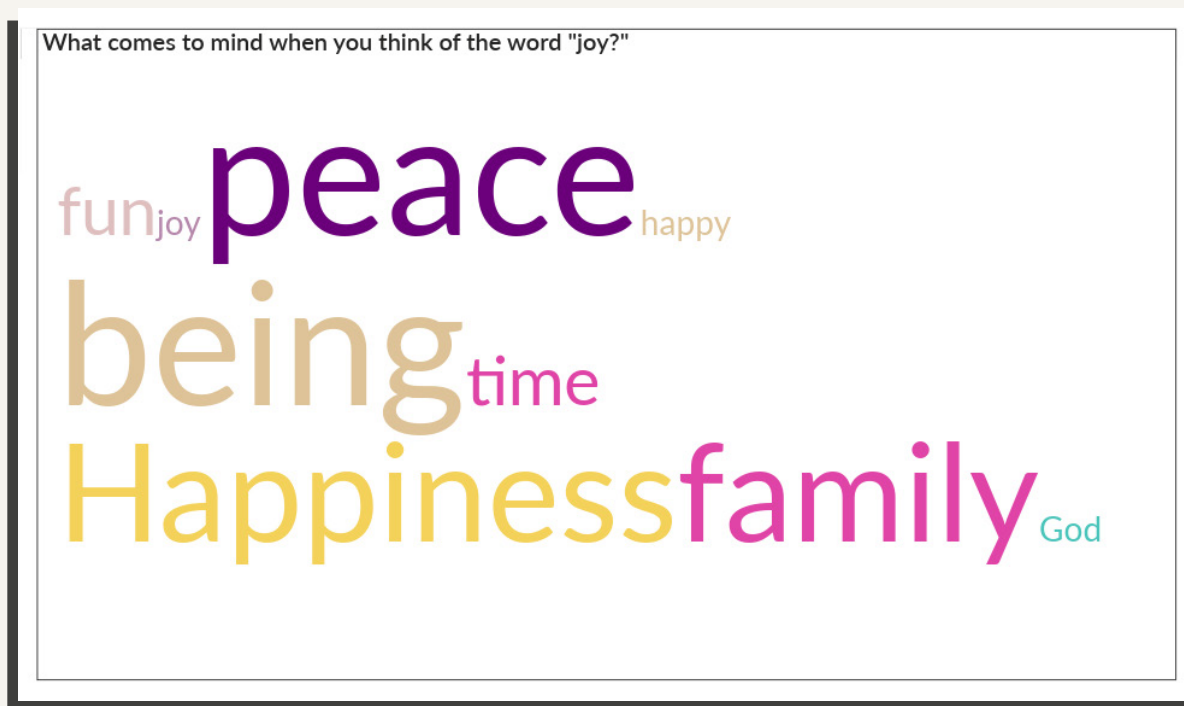


Figure 3. Word cloud depicting participant descriptions of joy.

Post-Survey Results

A total of 21 individuals finished the post-survey, resulting in a response rate of 68%. Below are key insights from the survey:



Figure 4. Word Cloud Illustrating Participants' Perspectives on the Session's Atmosphere.

This word cloud shows how many participants had a positive view of the session's atmosphere.

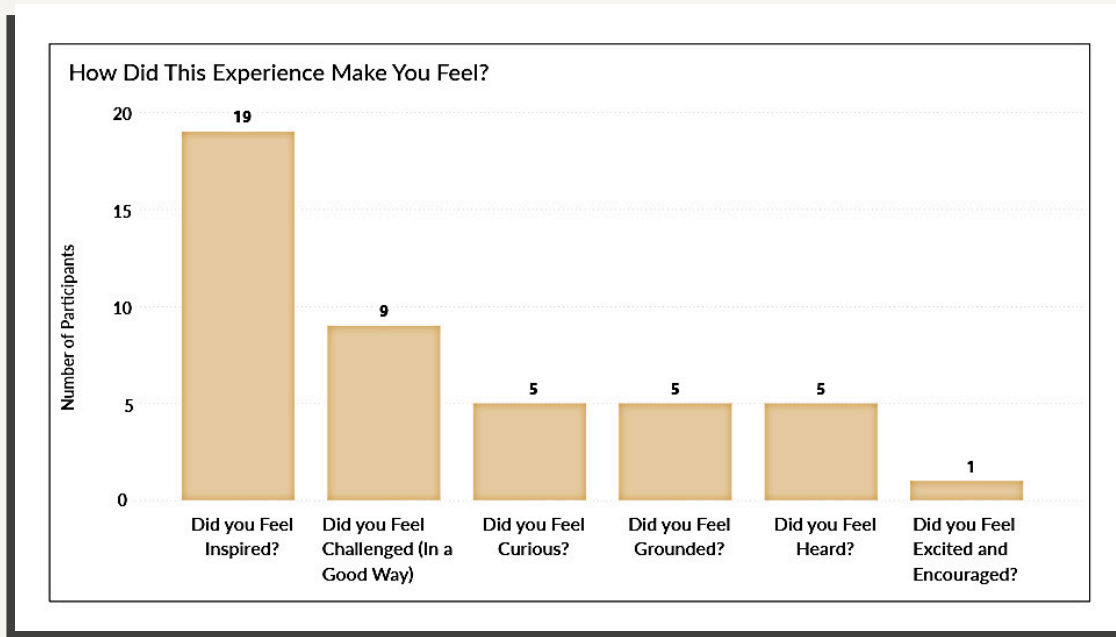


Figure 5. Participant Experiences.

Most participants left the event deeply inspired by the positive discussions it sparked.

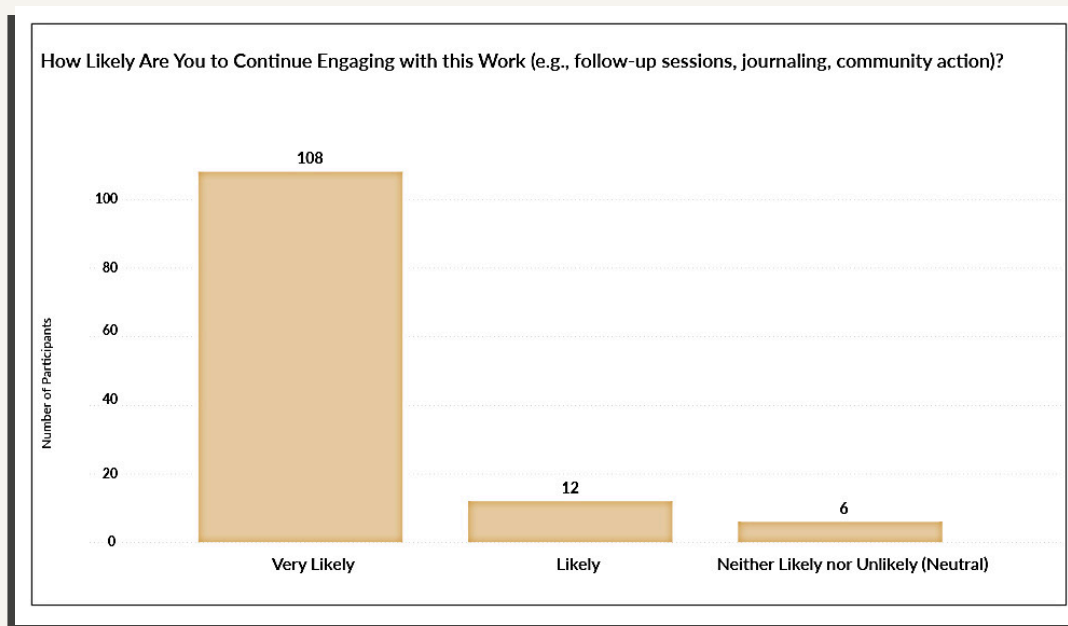


Figure 6. Participant Engagement in the Work.

The vast majority of participants stated that they would like to continue engaging in this work via follow-up sessions, journaling, and/or community action.

KEY THEMES

The following section presents some themes that emerged during the session:

The Power of a Father's Presence

Throughout the session, multiple participants discussed the importance of coming together to achieve positive outcomes for their communities. Some talked about how, historically, communities used to have support systems in which all neighbors took care of each other's children to ensure they did not get into trouble. In essence, there was a strong emphasis on a return to collective rather than individual responsibility in parenting children.

"Because every child that comes out of every home in your neighborhood, rather it's next door, down the street, is a child that you're responsible for, and you have the responsibilities. Speak up and speak truth into that child's life." – Community Conversations: Voices from Fathers of Color in Buffalo (CCVFCB) attendee

This desire for a return to collective responsibility for raising neighborhood children was also echoed by some attendees, who said that community members should do more than acknowledge children's misbehavior; they should actually address it.

"We have to speak instead of just not, you know, just acknowledging, just looking at it and seeing it happen, and say that that's not my problem. That's not my responsibility." – CCVFCB attendee

Consistent with the individual pillar of community power building, some participants called for a shift in mindset towards the belief that "we are the cavalry" to address community issues. Specifically, one participant stated that we should not be waiting for the cavalry, since we are the cavalry, highlighting the need for individuals to recognize their own ability to be key players in improving their communities.

"When I was on the City Council and hearing similar conversations and one of the, the things that I think that brings out, that I'm hearing talk around is that as men, especially men of color, is that we're waiting for the cavalry and we don't realize that we are cavalry. That's right. And we have. We can't change the mindset of understanding that we are the cavalry and we. So even in Oishei. Oishei should be an add on. It should be an add on to a movement that's taking place because we changed our mindset." – CCVFCB attendee

Empowerment through mentorship was another theme that emerged throughout the session. Many participants discussed the importance of mentorship in guiding and supporting youth and young men to make positive life choices. Mentorship was viewed as a way to provide consistent support, build relationships, and model positive behaviors that would improve the overall community.

"The whole vision is being the person we needed growing up so that young men become the best versions of themselves." – CCVFCB attendee

Science of Joy for Black Fathers

Some participants spoke at length about the importance of experiencing joy in one's life. For example, there were lengthy discussions about how joy is a deeper emotion than mere happiness and can be integral to living a purposeful life.

"Joy is more than an emotion, right? Like it's a virtue. It's something that we can use, we can leverage in our lives to help strengthen the relationships that we have that are filled with purpose." – CCVFCB attendee

Others viewed joy as a symbol of mental health that creates community solidarity. Specifically, it meant relishing one's achievements in life.

"Joy, restoration, resilience. That's mental health, right? That's celebrating our wins. That's us coming together." – CCVFCB attendee

Conversely, other participants said words like 'joy' were not commonly used, especially among Black men. This admission sparked a discussion about how ideas of Black masculinity play a huge role in emotional expression, which may be limiting the degree to which Black men can explore an emotion such as joy.

"I'm like black joy? What does that mean?" – CCVFCB attendee

"As Black men, we don't typically throw around words like joy." – CCVFCB attendee

These findings suggest that while joy is a crucially important emotion to many participants, some voiced how one's upbringing can prevent it from being fully experienced due to social expectations (i.e., ideas of Black masculinity).

Grassroots Problem Solving

Various participants discussed the value of grassroots problem-solving in driving systemic change at the neighborhood, city, and regional levels. For instance, some participants mentioned their own organizations and called on others to join their efforts to aid their communities.

"Adversity Builds Character is a mentoring program. We would love to get you brothers involved." – CCVFCB attendee

Others highlighted their inspiration for engaging in collective community organizing at the local and regional level. The types of organizations ranged from businesses to non-profit organizations serving Black communities.

"We could talk all day about what we don't have, but we gotta do it. That's why I took the initiative and started a boxing program." – CCVFCB attendee

"Being a business owner opened the door to link with all these organizations. I became a facilitator at the Buffalo Fatherhood Initiative." – CCVFCB attendee

Dispel Negative Stereotypes of Black Fathers

Some participants embraced the idea of pushing back against negative stereotypes about Black communities. They instead highlighted how specific issues are not unique to the Black community but rather part of a larger system of oppression that impacts all types of communities.

"We are not unique around that trauma. America is a violent place. It ain't just Black people. It's not just a Black problem." – CCVFCB attendee

Other participants noted that the best narrative is one built around people's strengths and how they live, rather than where they live.

"It's not where you live, it's how you live." – CCVFCB attendee

Institutional/Policy Failings and Deficits

Participants spoke at length about various institutional and policy shortcomings that have been failing their communities. For example, some talked about how schools are not adequately addressing the mental health needs of children and how it relates to a lack of racial diversity in the teaching workforce.

"Teachers don't realize our kids deal with these traumas. If you're about to teach in an urban area, these kids live this stuff. The teaching force is majority white females. That contributes to it also." – CCVFCB attendee

Relatedly, some participants discussed the importance of greater investment in mental health resources for their communities to address unresolved trauma.

"A lot of mental health [resources] should be implemented in our communities in order to help us face traumas and deal with traumas and acknowledge that traumas do exist." – CCVFCB attendee

Financial Literacy

Notably, some participants highlighted financial literacy as a foundational issue that contributes to various social ills, such as intergenerational poverty, strained familial relationships, and educational setbacks.

"Financial literacy is the biggest issue. Not just income—what you do with money. Give most families a million and many would be broke in three or four years. Look at professional athletes." – CCVFCB attendee

Potential solutions that were raised included developing financial literacy modules for youth in the public education system, and normalizing money talks among family members.

KEY THEME MAPPING

Session Themes	Strategic Framework Focus Areas
The Power of a Father's Presence	Collective Community Organizing
Science of Joy for Black Fathers	Joy, Restoration, Resilience
Grassroots Problem Solving	Collective Community Organizing
Dispel Negative Stereotypes of Black Fathers	Narrative Change
Institutional/Policy Failings and Deficits	Policies and Practices
Financial Literacy	Individual

Many of the themes are aligned with strategic framework focus areas from Oishei's Community Power Building Framework. The following are some concrete examples:

- The Power of a Father's Presence theme is mapped on with collective community organizing due to major emphasis on collective power being used to shape neighborhood and city level changes.
- Similarly, the Grassroots Problem Solving theme perfectly aligned with the focus area of collective community organizing because they extensively talked about collective solutions to community problems.
- Science of Joy for Black Fathers mapped on with Joy, Restoration, Resilience, which focuses on Black joy as a deliberate act of resistance and a declaration of power.
- Dispel Negative Stereotypes of Black Fathers perfectly lined up with the focus area of narrative change. This area highlights the importance of moving past narratives that solely emphasize challenges and "endurance" and instead focuses on existing strengths, which aligns with the sentiment of the many of the attendees.
- Institutional/Policy Failings and Deficits theme coincides with the focus area of policies and practices. This focus area describes supporting efforts that change rules, policies, practices, and systems that perpetuate inequity. This group of attendees spoke at length about institutional/policy shortcomings that created unequal outcomes for members of their communities.

SESSION II | BLACK JOY IS STRATEGY: CELEBRATING, HONORING, AND BUILDING WITH BLACK MEN IN BUFFALO

Background

The second session, titled “Black Joy is Strategy: Celebrating, Honoring, and Building with Black Men in Buffalo,” was organized and led by Najja A. Bouldin at the SUNY Buffalo State University campus, specifically in the Alex F. Osborn Brainstorming Room within the Innovation Suite of E.H. Butler Library. Bouldin, an innovation strategist, leadership coach, and entrepreneurial mentor, is dedicated to empowering both individuals and organizations to tap into their creative potential. As the Founder and Principal Consultant at Phoenix Innovation Group, LLC, he has successfully cultivated leadership abilities, self-assurance, goal attainment, and resilience among a diverse range of clients. Bouldin encapsulates his passion for this work with the phrase: “Innovation starts with imagination.”

In alignment with his innovative approach, Bouldin's session was a half-day immersive workshop designed to reframe narratives surrounding Black masculinity into a celebration of joy, strength, and leadership. This workshop featured profound storytelling, creative challenges, and candid discussions, empowering participants to collaborate in envisioning a thriving future for Buffalo's East Side.



Figure 7. Najja A. Bouldin facilitating the session.



Figure 8. Sankofa symbol

Participants completed a pre-survey before this session that included questions about black joy, their expectations about the event, and their attitudes about the Oishei Foundation's new strategic direction. Upon their arrival at the session, participants were invited to reflect on the prompt: “What do I carry forward? What do I leave behind?” Participants posted their written reflections on a Sankofa Reflection Wall in the room to set a tone of reverence, introspection, and transformation. The term “Sankofa” originates from the Twi language of Ghana and means “go back and get.” This term illustrates the importance of learning from the past to inform the present and future. The concept of Sankofa is commonly represented by a long-necked bird with its head turned backwards, its feet facing forward, carrying an egg in its beak.

Background (*continued*)

Additionally, this activity sought to make participants feel psychologically safe and eager to express their feelings openly. Next, a climate of safety and trust was created by highlighting the Ubuntu phrase, “I am because we are”, which describes the interconnectedness of all people and the importance of community.

After Bouldin provided the overview of the session, participants engaged in an icebreaker activity in which they responded to the prompt, “What does joy taste like?” Each participant was invited to share one memory using sensory language (e.g., food, music, laughter, scent, or even metaphor). Participants also had the opportunity to document their responses a joy map mural. Once that activity was completed, participants responded to the prompt cards with “What If” questions that blended leadership, identity, and futurism. For example, “What if joy was your default leadership style”? and “What if we built a city around our dreams, not our trauma? This activity was meant to encourage creative problem-solving and strengthen confidence in shared storytelling. Subsequently, attendees were served a light catered meal from a local vendor.



Figure 9. Session attendees engaged in discussion.

Once lunch concluded, participants engaged in a facilitated dialogue about navigating stress, expectations, defining legacy, voice, and manhood on their own terms. They also talked about healing rituals, the importance of embracing stillness, and radical rest. Participants provided extensive qualitative data through their shared challenges and diverse experiences. The facilitator then had participants post their insights on the wall using post-its to foster communal knowledge and set the stage for a call to action or the next phase of action. The closing ritual of the session consisted the question, “What are you taking with you?” and then participants completed a post-survey. This survey asked about their experience, the event atmosphere, and the insights they gained. Lastly, participants were offered a gift card to compensate them for their attendance.

Research Findings

Demographics

Approximately 20 Black or African American people attended this session, with ages ranging from 7 to 60+.

Pre-Survey Results

18 people completed the pre-survey. The following are some of the key findings:

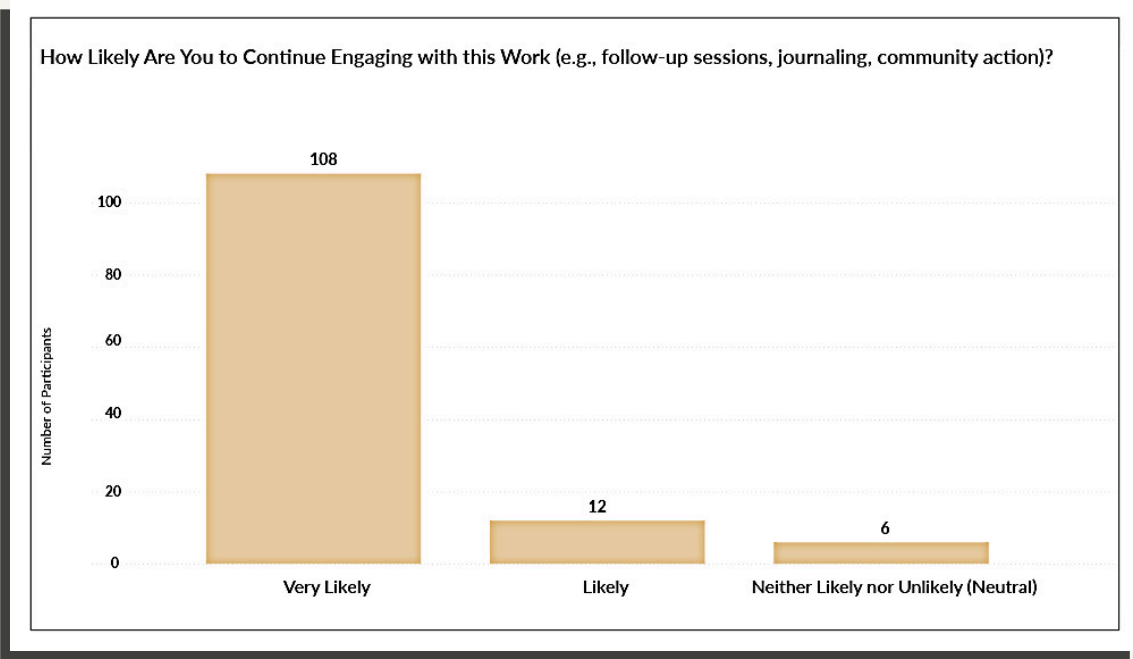


Figure 10. Participant Comfort with Sharing Personal Experiences

Most participants felt comfortable sharing their personal experiences and perspectives at the session.

Note: Post-survey results were not included in the report due to low response rates (i.e., 15%).

Research Findings (continued)

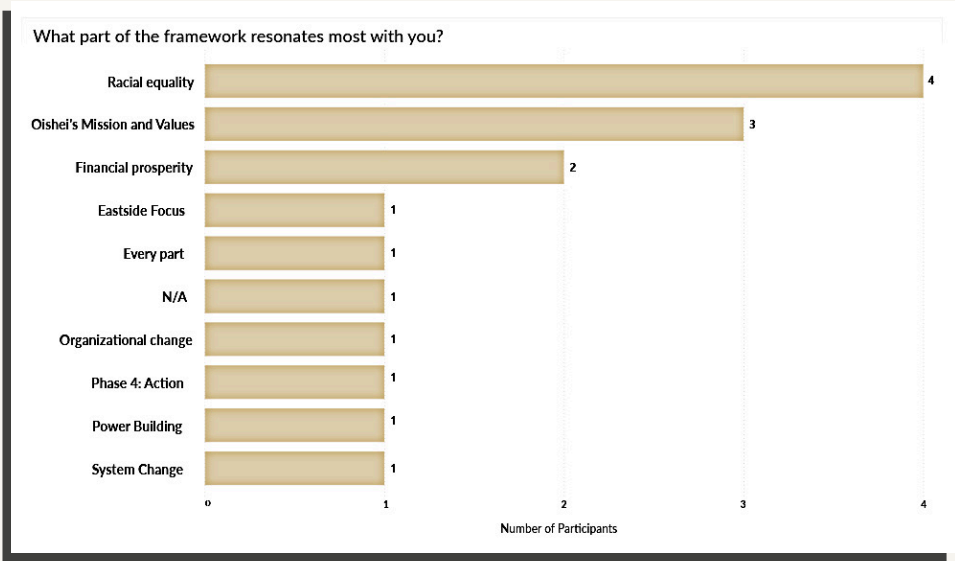


Figure 11. Opinions about the Oishei Framework

Most of the people who completed the pre-survey resonated with some part of the Oishei Foundation’s framework.



Figure 13. Word Cloud About Participant Experiences

KEY THEMES

The following section presents some themes that emerged during the session:

Masculinity, Joy and Vulnerability

Multiple participants talked about the challenges not being able to show emotional vulnerability due to the rigid standards of Black masculinity. For example, some men discussed how they were raised not to smile and instead to focus on fostering their ability to provide for others rather than reflecting on their emotions.

"When you're talking about joy... a sense of 'scaredness' came over me. I'm happy about things, but I'm not sure if I am joyful. I've been programmed not to have those emotions. I still gotta produce." - Black Joy is Strategy (BJS) Participant

Some participants even talked about how they have actively discouraged their peers from being open about their emotions in the past because that is how they were raised.

"Black men barely open up . My brother did, and I kind of snapped on him. That was not the time to do that." - BJS Participant

*"I was taught not to smile very early on. We don't do that. Ain't nothing sweet over here."
- BJS Participant*

In my life, I don't know if I will ever really.. I'm happy about things, but I'm not sure if I'm joyful... I've been programmed not to have those emotions." - Black Joy is Strategy Joy Participant

These quotes reflect an acknowledgment of how traditional views of Black masculinity can lead to Black men policing one another on how they should express their emotions.

Other participants, however, believed that vulnerability was a source of strength that should be nurtured. For some, it was the most valid form of being one's self.

*"Vulnerability isn't softness; it's listening to your spirit and having the courage to be who you are."
- BJS Participant*

Community Capital Beyond Money

Another central theme that emerged during the session was the importance of community capital. Community capital was described as relationships, culture, navigation, and knowledge, which can be leveraged to create opportunities that would otherwise not be available. Some specific types are the following:

- Social capital – Trusted networks and connections
- Relationship capital – Depth and reciprocity in ties
- Navigational capital – Familiarity with how to navigate systems and institutions
- Cultural capital – Shared language, norms, and creative practices

The facilitator summarized this concept with the Ubuntu proverb, “I am because we are,” which highlights the interconnectedness of people.

Various participants spoke about the value of tapping into these types of capital to improve life outcomes. This discussion included talking about how they use relationships and connections to help people in their own networks.

“I always carry someone with me. I cheer-lead hard.” - BJS Participant

“My superpower is connecting people and making people feel good.” - BJS Participant

Life Pressures and Barriers to Well-being

Throughout the session, multiple participants talked about how the numerous life responsibilities coupled with the unique challenges of being a Black male in the United States was a constant source of stress. These challenges ranged from financial responsibilities (e.g., utilities, rent, food) to health issues to familial obligations. When experienced together, some participants described not being able to relax or be introspective since there was always something that needed to be done to maintain the household.

*“I still gotta produce.. even though I tore my ACL, I got pneumonia, I still gotta go to work.”
- BJS Participant*

“I don’t even have time to really breathe... I still have to go to work.” - BJS Participant

“I need a rest....but I need the money.” - BJS Participant

These quotes highlight how the never-ending demands of life can interfere with one’s well-being.

Other participants described how being a Black male requires you to constantly self-police your behavior so that you are not seen as a threat by others. An example of this self-policing behavior included code-switching in the workplace and other locations to avoid misunderstandings.

“I’m 18 years old... I got to be careful... it’s kind of suppression... tone of voice... I can say something, laugh, but they’ll take it as an insult.” - BJS Participant

“We...other folk do not have to think about how they show up to work... It’s a constant thing with us... how we enter a space... facial expressions. - BJS Participant

“Thinking about how I show up in the space and how that might impact somebody and how I need to either shift, deviate, navigate to make somebody else feel comfortable.” - BJS Participant

Life Pressures (*continued*)

Quotes like these demonstrate the everyday pressure and toll of having to code-switch in predominantly White spaces to avoid conflict.

Other participants talked about how Black stereotypes believed by their peers limited what they felt comfortable doing in life. Specifically, the belief that some activities go against the social expectations (i.e., stereotypes) of what Black people should do.

“Even with Black people.....I still kind of have to feel like I can’t do anything that’s too new...you kind of got to explain it.” – Black Joy Strategy Participant

“I also liked rock...blues...classical.. That was a no-no... then you’re considered white. Pressure to be a stereotype.” – BJS Participant

These quotes describe how racist stereotypes can become so deeply entrenched that even the people they were designed to harm can begin to believe them (i.e., internalized racism).

Community and Brotherhood

Another notable theme that emerged from the session was the importance of community and brotherhood. Many of the participants talked about how much they valued having a space where they could be their authentic selves. They also valued the fact that it was a welcoming space with other Black males from various walks of life.

“We got a lot of incredible thinking power in here.” - BJS Participant

“It’d definitely be nice for there to be more of these spaces... uniting all the people that are doing the work.” – BJS Participant

“When Black men gather in truth, in love and in power, we don’t just survive, we set the future on fire.” – BJS Participant

“I believe strongly in Ubuntu... I am, because we are.” – BJS Participant

“My favorite part about today's conversation was the great thoughts, the great thoughts all around. People just being coming here, being supportive, showing love, and being able to have free speech, open conversations, being able to understand each other and love each other. What I'm going to start implementing today in my life is I can't say one thing. There's so much greatness around this room. So many greatness in the talks and conversations today that all of it I'm going to have to bring to myself internalized and operationalized in my day-to-day.” – BJS Participant

These statements highlight the distinct importance of fostering an environment where Black men can engage in collective brainstorming and collaboration to tackle obstacles and uplift each other.

KEY THEME MAPPING

Session Themes	Strategic Framework Focus Areas
Masculinity, Joy, and Vulnerability	Joy, Restoration, Resilience
Community Capital Beyond Money	Collective Community Organizing
Life Pressures and Barriers to Wellbeing	Individual
Community and Brotherhood	Collective Community Organizing

Throughout the session many themes emerged that mapped on with the strategic framework focus areas of the Community Power Building framework. The following are some concrete examples:

- The theme of Masculinity, Joy, and Vulnerability strongly aligned with the strategic framework focus area of Joy, Restoration, Resilience. Attendees talked about the importance of Black Joy and the various social barriers that stood in the way of achieving it, such as rigid masculinity standards.
- Community Capital Beyond Money is a theme that overlapped with Collective Community Organizing because it touched upon collective actions, such as building up social capital (i.e., relationship capital) to create new opportunities instead of solely focusing on financial capital.
- Life Pressures and Barriers to Wellbeing aligned with the strategic framework focus area called Individual. This focus area stresses the importance of investing in the individual power people of color hold to support the advancement of purposeful and unified collective action. Throughout this session, attendees expressed the various barriers that prevented them from thriving as individuals.
- Community Brotherhood mapped on with the strategic framework focus area Collective Community Organizing because attendees had deep discussions about the importance of Black men coming together to support one another. Additionally, they talked about how this connectedness could spark change in their communities.

SESSION III | BLACK MEN: BUILD, BOND & CONNECT

Background

The third session, titled “Black Men: Build, Bond & Connect,” was organized and led by Daniel Robertson at the Next Level Boot Camps gym located in Cheektowaga, New York. Robertson serves as the Director of the Boys and Men of Color Initiative at Say Yes Buffalo. This initiative, commonly referred to as Breaking Barriers, is a youth leadership council comprised of young men of color aged 12 to 24. Their mission is to collectively advocate for racial equity, social justice, and changes in policy. Under Robertson's guidance, Breaking Barriers has equipped numerous youths of color with skills in civic leadership and direct lobbying to promote change within their communities. Additionally, he offers workshops, motivational speaking, and similar endeavors through his consulting firm, Latitude 42.88, LLC. Robertson is a dedicated advocate, tirelessly working to ensure that Buffalo's youth and young men from underprivileged backgrounds flourish through mentorship and leadership development.



Figure 14. Breaking Barriers Logo

Before the session, participants were asked to complete a pre-survey containing questions about their demographics and how they heard about the event. At the start of the session, participants were greeted and provided with snacks and water before their workout. The regimented workout consisted of 8-10 high-intensity training exercises. This activity was meant to boost mood and relieve stress before engaging in the workshop discussions. After the workout, the fitness instructor led participants through a cool-down. The cool-down session also coincided with an overview of the Oishei Foundation's strategic direction and framework.

Background (*continued*)



Figure 15. Black Men Build Fitness Activity

The next part of the session was an immersive icebreaker in which participants had to identify and match definitions of various types of positive emotions (e.g., happiness, joy, jubilation, excitement, contentment, satisfaction, etc.). This was meant to spark critical thinking and discussion about how these positive emotions align with social expectations of Black masculinity. Once the icebreaker concluded, the facilitator had participants break into groups and respond to the prompt: “What does joy feel, look, sound, and taste like?” This activity also included other prompts, such as “What is Black joy” Internal versus external?”, “How do we create spaces for men to experience joy unapologetically?”, “How do you create the narrative around men and black joy?”, and “What people, places, things, and experiences elicit joy for you in Buffalo?” The goal of this activity was to encourage participants to have candid discussions about Black joy and how it does or does not manifest in their everyday lives.

Background (*continued*)



Figure 16. Discussion Session

The subsequent activity began with participants watching a clip from the film “The Pursuit of Happiness” and then having a lively discussion about it using guiding questions, such as “What systems block Black men from sustained joy?” “How do we affirm Black men’s worthiness of joy & celebration?”, “What does investment in Black joy/celebration of culture look like?”, and “Can we cultivate joy every day?” Participants were encouraged to share their perspectives candidly, respectfully, and engagingly. This activity aimed to shift participants from an individual to a collective understanding of Black joy by providing a deeper understanding of systemic and cultural realities that may limit it.

At the conclusion of the session, the participants reflected on the various themes that emerged throughout the day. They were also encouraged to share one word, phrase, or image that captures how they’re leaving the space. The facilitator directed participants to complete a digital survey that asked about their experiences during the session. Once the survey was completed, participants received a gift card as a token of appreciation for their participation.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Demographics

Approximately 43 Black/African American males attended this session. Their ages ranged from 6 to 71.

Pre-Survey Results

49 people completed the pre-survey. The following are some of the key findings:

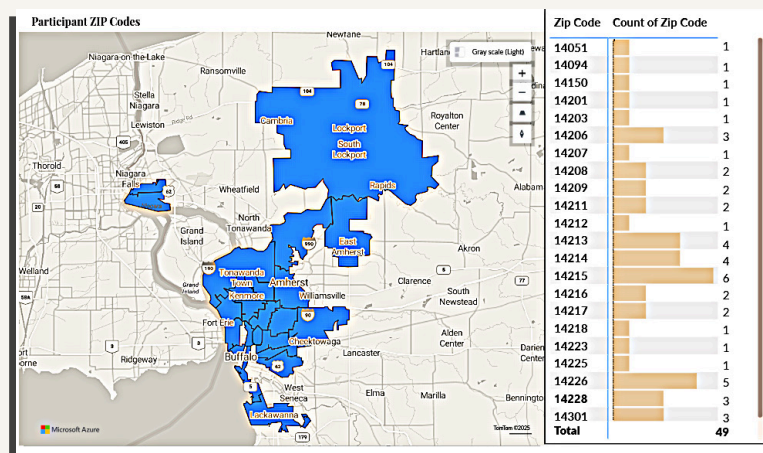


Figure 18. ZIP Code Map of Participants

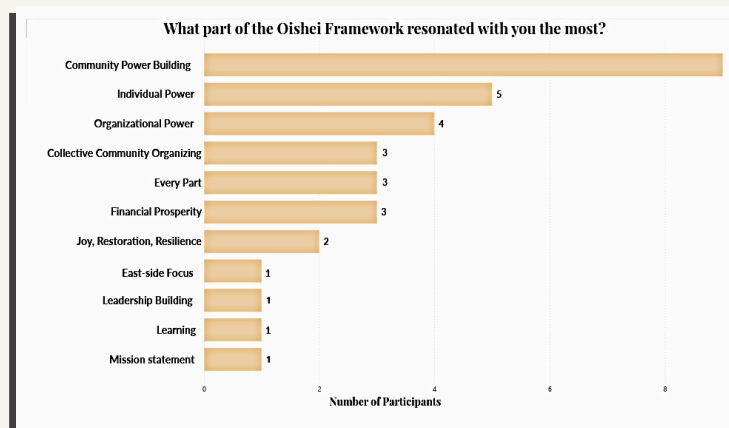


Figure 19. Opinions about the Oishei Framework.

Research Findings (*continued*)

Most people who completed the survey had positive opinions about various parts of the Oishei Foundation's framework.

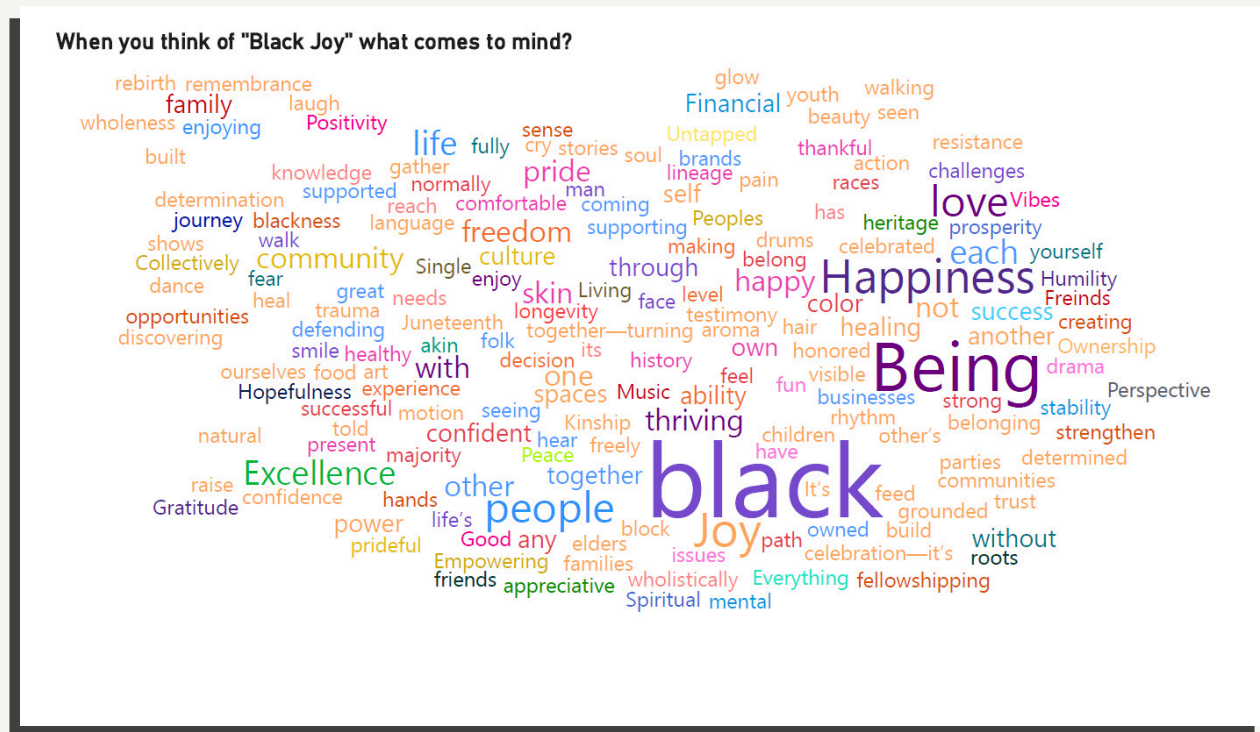


Figure 20. Word cloud with descriptions of black joy.

Post-Survey Results

A total of 18 participants completed the post-survey. The survey response rate was 42%. The following are some of the key findings:



Figure 21. Word Cloud of Participant Descriptions of the Atmosphere of the Event.

The majority of participants reported positive feelings about the experience.

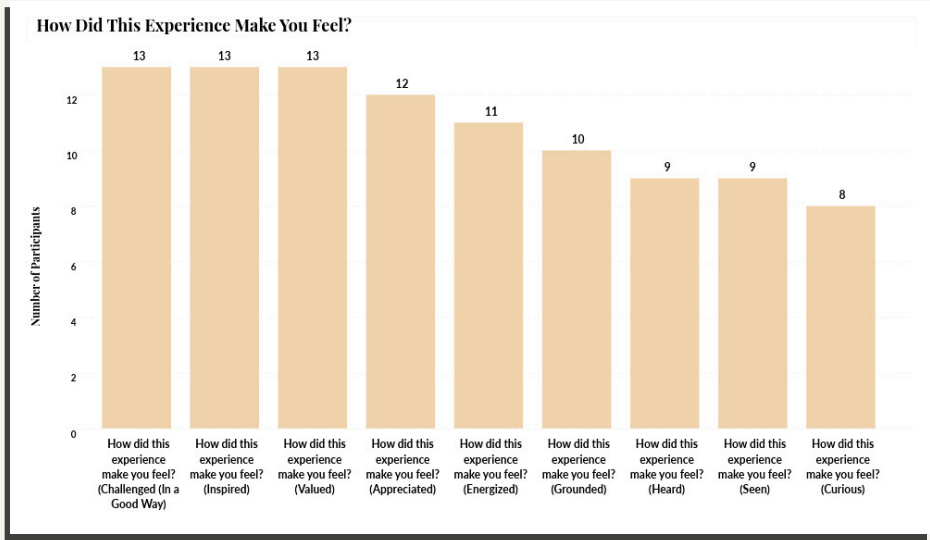


Figure 22. Participant Responses to the Question, "How Did This Experience Make You Feel?"

Post-Survey Results *(continued)*

Participants were divided over which session resonated most with them.

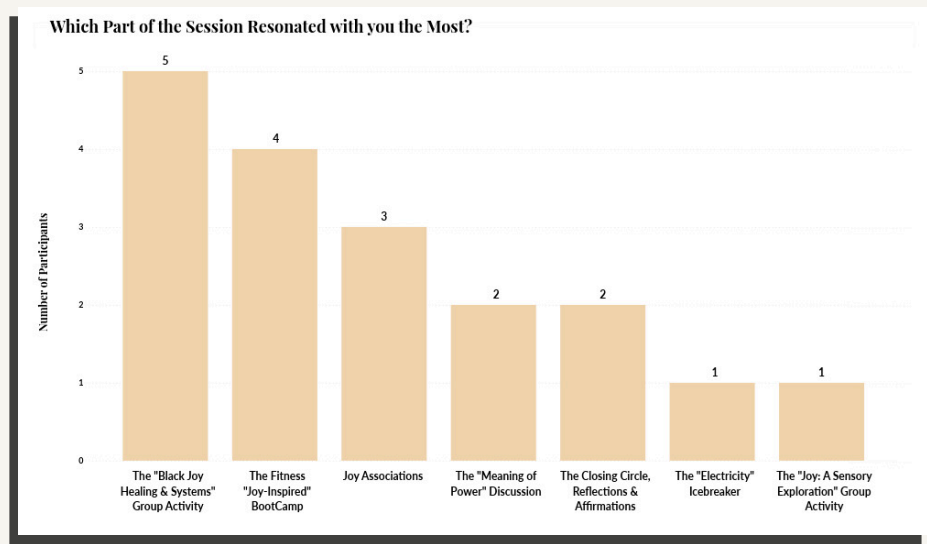


Figure 23. Participant Responses to the Question, "Which Part of the Session Resonated With You The Most?"

Most participants reported that they were “very likely” to continue engaging in the type of work discussed in the session.

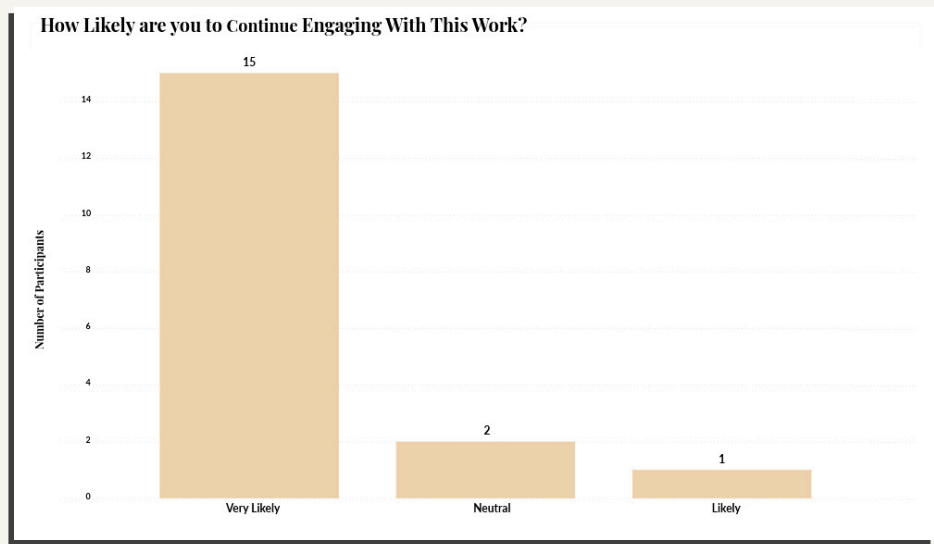


Figure 24. Participant Responses to the Question, "How Likely Are You to Continue Engaging With This Work?"

KEY THEMES

Joy, Happiness, and Positive Emotion Literacy

During the Joy Associations activity, in which participants had to associate a positive word with an image, some participants reported struggling to distinguish between positive words (e.g., happiness vs. joy, excitement vs. contentment). This activity became a source of frustration for some, whereas others viewed it as an opportunity to expand their emotional range.

"I should know more about happiness right off the back of my head. If it was negative terms, I probably would have been able to match them." - Black Men: Build, Bond & Connect (BMBBC) Participant

"If it was some negative things, it would have been like, easy to pop out...but when it comes to positive things, you're not so quick to associate those." - BMBBC Participant

"The things that I thought was my happiness and joy.. it's really not. It's just really what brings me excitement." - BMBBC Participant

"Now I'm understanding.... We have an array of different emotions... and now I'm learning I only know five of their names." - BMBBC Participant

These statements highlight that certain Black men are not cultivated to encounter various positive emotions, such as joy, excitement, jubilation, contentment, and happiness.

Systems and Power

Throughout the "Meaning of Power" discussion, many participants engaged in lengthy debate over what constitutes power and which systems would best benefit Black prosperity. Some participants argued that it is necessary to navigate existing systems to achieve it, whereas others urged the development of independent Black systems. Examples of independent Black systems included collective ownership and collaborative decision-making. Another group of participants dismissed talk about systems because their main priority was survival above all else.

"We have to start moving like the South Buffalo political groups—build our own."
- BMBBC Participant

"We have a lot of power and us working together, that is a system." - BMBBC Participant

"There has to be something that we need...everybody in this room has a skill set... leverage our resources together quietly.... Sometimes it's got to be done silently."
- BMBBC Participant

Systems and Power (*continued*)

"There has to be something that we need...everybody in this room has a skill set... leverage our resources together quietly.... Sometimes it's got to be done silently." - BMBBC Participant

"Ownership piece.... we all put a hundred dollars together... then at the end of the year, we collectively decide what we doing with this." - BMBBC Participant

"When you are trying survive, none of that stuff [systems] is really on your mind like that." - BMBBC Participant

"I don't care who's going to help me...The system don't even matter at that point when you really in that moment." - BMBBC Participant

These quotes detail the competing views on how best to achieve Black prosperity while also navigating the realities of systemic racism.

Another key discussion was about the development of Black leadership and succession plans to ensure that social justice movements do not lose momentum. Participants talked about how previous movements often relied heavily on a single person for leadership. They also discussed the importance of accepting that there will be different Black factions that do not necessarily agree on their approaches to Black prosperity, but that at the very least they should share a vision for their communities.

"If what you're talking about requires a clear plan and a clear leadership structure... start with those who are hanging at the Black upper middle class... that's a long-term plan...Leadership often falls apart because we're so structured to put so much on one person." - BMBBC Participant

"We don't create enough lieutenants." - BMBBC Participant

"We don't necessarily need one vision... If we all agree that we got a North Star...we can take a step together." - BMBBC Participant

Mentorship and Intergenerational Ties

Another theme that emerged during the “Meaning of Power” discussion was the value of mentorship, especially across intergenerational mentorship. Many participants discussed how they either benefited from mentorship or wished it were more readily available to them. Others discussed how the mentor/mentee relationship benefits both individuals, since they each have unique points of view.

“All of us need somebody to push us to our next level...All of us need accountability.”

- BMBBC Participant

“I needed the OGs. I needed the community of people...Being present is everything.”

- BMBBC Participant

“We got to build relationships...They might not take it the first time...but I’m still here. When you are ready, I’m here.” - BMBBC Participant

“I was the hard-headed kid that didn’t want the mentorship but I had a mentor that pushed me. He showed up because he genuinely had a love.” - BMBBC Participant

“I don’t have to go through the trauma..if I just sit my ass down and listen.” - BMBBC Participant

These quotes emphasize the strong value many participants placed on mentorship. Additionally, they suggest that mentorship continue to be available in communities to ensure that youth have positive role models.

KEY THEME MAPPING

Session Themes	Strategic Framework Focus Areas
Joy, Happiness, and Positive Emotion Literacy	Joy, Restoration, Resilience
Systems and Power	Collective Community Organizing
Mentorship and Intergenerational Ties	Collective Community Organizing

Throughout the session many themes emerged that mapped on with the strategic framework focus areas of the Community Power Building framework. The following are some concrete examples:

- Joy, Happiness, and Positive Emotion Literacy mapped on with the strategic framework focus area of Joy Restoration, Resilience. Attendees talked at length about Black Joy as well as their experience or lack of experience with other positive emotions.
- The theme of Systems and Power aligned perfectly with Collective Community Organizing because attendees have lengthy decisions about the necessity of coming together to drive systemic change in their communities.
- Mentorship and Intergenerational also overlapped with Collective Community Organizing given that attendees expressed a desire for more collective efforts toward providing mentorship for the youth.

LESSONS LEARNED & RECOMMENDATIONS

Session I | Lessons Learned

Social connections among men, although sparse at times, are much needed or desired. The way that men celebrated each other indicated that there were an appreciation and need for more opportunities. More opportunities are needed for relationship building and networking to promote relational and social capital, particularly as it relates to entrepreneurship, mentorship, coaching, and grassroots non-profits for men, boys, and fathers.

Western New York has a growing ecosystem of fathers, mentors, and grassroots organizations who are actively working with boys and young men—but they lack the structured support, leadership training, and organizational capacity needed to scale their impact.

The session's 36 attendees, ranging from 16 to 60+, shared deep insights into:

- The generational impact of father absence
- The need for mentorship pipelines
- Community responsibility for youth development
- The fatigue caused by institutional failures
- The importance of joy, emotional well-being, and fatherhood identity
- The centrality of financial literacy and stability
- The belief that they must become “the cavalry” for their own communities

Survey results showed that participants left the session inspired, energized, and extremely willing to continue the work through follow-up sessions, community action, and sustained engagement.

Recommendation: Fatherhood Capacity & Innovation Think Tank (FCIT)

Strategic Recommendation: Launch the Fatherhood Capacity & Innovation Think Tank (FCIT)

A leadership capacity-building institute and community think tank designed to strengthen grassroots WNY organizations and equip them to support boys from fatherless homes and expand father engagement.

Overview: What the Data Reveals and Why This Moment Requires Investment

The session titled “Community Conversations: Voices from Fathers of Color in Buffalo,” facilitated by fatherhood specialist Antoine Johnson, revealed a significant and pressing truth, highlighting a distinct opportunity:

The region needs an incubator that strengthens the leadership, strategy, and operational capacity of small non-profits and grassroots actors working with fathers and boys.

The moment is ideal for Oishei to seed and scale a fatherhood infrastructure that transforms insight into coordinated impact.

Why a Fatherhood Think Tank? Evidence from the Session

1. Community Togetherness & Collective Responsibility Demand a Structural Home

Participants emphasized neighborhood-based responsibility and a return to the “village” model:

“Every child...is a child that you're responsible for...Speak up and speak truth into that child's life.”

*“We’re waiting for the cavalry, and we don’t realize that **we are the cavalry.**”*

This readiness must be organized into a **collective leadership structure.**

A think tank provides:

- A shared space for problem-solving
 - Leadership training
 - Collaboration across organizations
 - Unified community strategies
-

2. Mentorship Was Identified as the Most Powerful Tool for Boys & Young Men

Throughout the session:

“Be the person we needed growing up so that young men become the best versions of themselves.”

Grassroots leaders are already mentoring—but without:

- ☑ Program design support
- ☑ Staffing 41
- ☑ Evaluation tools
- ☑ Funding readiness
- ☑ Coaching
- ☑ Shared best practices

FCIT fills this gap by training and equipping fatherhood leaders and youth mentors to work more effectively and sustainably.

3. Joy & Wellness Are Essential Tools for Father Engagement, Yet Underdeveloped

Participants discussed joy as emotional strength:

“Joy is more than an emotion...it’s a virtue...it strengthens relationships.”

Yet others expressed unfamiliarity:

“As Black men, we don’t typically throw around words like joy.”

The Think Tank builds:

- Emotional literacy
- Vulnerability-as-strength frameworks
- Joy-centered leadership practices
- Fatherhood identity development

These are foundational for leaders working with boys who lack father figures.

4. Grassroots Problem-Solving Energy Is High—But Organizations Lack Capacity

Participants named their own solutions:

“Adversity Builds Character is a mentoring program. We would love to get you brothers involved.”

“I took the initiative and started a boxing program.”

“Being a business owner opened the door to link with all these organizations.”

These are **organic innovators**, but they need the infrastructure a think tank provides:

- ☑ Strategic planning
 - ☑ Organizational development
 - ☑ Evaluation tools
 - ☑ Board building 42
 - ☑ Fundraising readiness
 - ☑ Program management skills
 - ☑ Evaluation and data skills (Magnus Data Consulting)
-

5. Institutional Failures Require Organized Advocacy & Leadership Development

Participants voiced frustrations:

“Teachers don’t realize our kids deal with these traumas...the teaching force is majority white females.”

“Mental health [resources] should be implemented...to help us face traumas.”

The Think Tank builds:

- Advocacy skills
- Policy literacy
- Systems navigation training
- Organized collective voice

This initiative advances Oishei’s **Policies & Practices** pillar.

6. Financial Literacy Is a Core Structural Barrier

Participants clearly named financial literacy as foundational:

“Financial literacy is the biggest issue...Not just income—what you do with money.”

Leadership that supports boys and families must include:

- Financial coaching
- Organizational budgeting
- Resource development
- Personal and family financial empowerment tools

Program Structure: Fatherhood Capacity & Innovation Think Tank (FCIT)

Phase 1 – Fatherhood Leadership Identity & Joy-Based Frameworks (Months 1–3)

- Fatherhood identity exploration
- Emotional literacy and wellness training
- Joy-centered leadership sessions
- Trauma-responsive mentorship principles

Phase 2 – Non-profit & Grassroots Capacity Building (Months 4–6)

- Strategic planning
- Program design for father engagement & youth support
- Budgeting & financial literacy for leaders
- Collaboration-building across WNY organizations

Phase 3 – Mentorship & Youth Engagement Innovation Labs (Months 7–9)

- Evidence-based mentorship training
- Designing programs for boys from fatherless homes
- Cross-organizational peer mentoring teams
- Pilot projects with mini-grants

Phase 3 – Mentorship & Youth Engagement Innovation Labs (Months 7–9)

- Policy literacy & community organizing training
- Coordinated fatherhood advocacy network
- Leadership role placement (boards, committees, schools)
- Public presentation of Think Tank findings

Evaluation— Continuous

Led by **Magnus Data Consulting**, measuring:

- ☒ Leadership growth
- ☒ Organizational capacity increases
- ☒ Strengthening of mentorship pipelines
- ☒ Father engagement outcomes
- ☒ Impact on boys and young men 44
- ☒ Narrative shifts around fatherhood

Session II | Lessons Learned

Safe spaces matter was one important lesson learned. Men are craving environments where they can be vulnerable, be celebrated, and feel genuinely heard. When given that space, the depth of sharing and the joy witnessed reaffirmed how much these circles are needed.

Joy and vulnerability are strategic. Framing joy as a leadership practice, not just an emotion, unlocked a new mindset. Men walked away empowered to lead with purpose rather than performance.

Relationships are the engine. We need to build more avenues for men to build relational and social capital. Opportunities for mentorship, entrepreneurship, coaching, grassroots nonprofits, and health-focused support came up again and again, along with a desire to pour those resources into boys and fathers as well.

Collective action over lone heroes. Group participation isn't just beneficial, it's essential. The momentum we build together strengthens accountability and drives real change.

Participants consistently asked for more cross-generational mentorship, economic empowerment, mental health resources, creative outlets, and sustained programming.

The half-day immersive workshop became a living model of what happens when Black men are invited to imagine without constraint, heal without judgment, and create visions of their future free from deficit-based narratives.

From the *Sankofa Reflection Wall* to the *Ubuntu* grounding, from sensory storytelling to futurist "What If" prompts, the room became a laboratory of creative problem-solving and emotional restoration. The survey data revealed high comfort levels with sharing, and the qualitative insights were rich in vulnerability, honesty, and transformational thinking.

The themes were unmistakable:

- **Rigid emotional norms constrain Black masculinity—but men are eager for new narratives.**
- **Community capital, such as relationships, culture, navigation, and knowledge, is already abundant and under-leveraged.**
- **Life pressures, financial stress, and code-switching exhaustion are eroding well-being and identity.**
- **Black men crave spaces of authenticity, creativity, brotherhood, and collaborative imagination.**
- **Joy is not frivolous; it is an organizing principle, a wellness strategy, and a leadership catalyst.**

What happened in this session was not symbolic; it was empirical. It showed that when Black men are given a space to dream together, it strengthens their emotional literacy, expands their leadership identity, and generates actionable community insight.

This work is infrastructure.

This work is a cultural strategy.

This work is scalable.

Recommendation: The Development of Black Joy Innovation Fellowship (BJIF)

Based on the evidence gathered, we recommend that the Oishei Foundation transition from event-based support to the launch of a multi-month, cohort-driven initiative:

The Black Joy Innovation Fellowship (BJIF)

A 9–12 month creative leadership, narrative transformation, and community innovation fellowship for Black men in Buffalo.

Why This Fellowship? What the Data Makes Clear

1. Emotional Literacy Requires Strategic Investment

Participants expressed deep uncertainty about joy itself:

- *“I’ve been programmed not to have those emotions.”*
- *“I’m not sure if I’m joyful...”*
- *“We don’t do that. Ain’t nothing sweet over here.”*

This finding is not ambivalence; it is evidence of **emotional suppression shaped by racist and patriarchal social conditioning**.

The Fellowship will:

- ☒ Use creativity, storytelling, and sensory language (as introduced by Bouldin) to rebuild emotional vocabulary.
- ☒ Facilitate discussions that redefine vulnerability as strength: *“Vulnerability isn’t softness; it’s listening to your spirit...”*
- ☒ Provide tools for emotional self-awareness, rest, and radical well-being.

Emotional literacy is the foundation of leadership. This work activates it.

2. Community Capital is Abundant, but Underdeveloped as a Strategy

Participants named:

- Social capital
- Relationship capital
- Cultural capital
- Navigational capital

The Fellowship will:

- Formalize the teaching, mapping, and activation of community capital.
- Use Ubuntu principles (“I am because we are”) as a design framework.
- Equip men to convert relational strengths into leadership, advocacy, and economic mobility.

This fellowship approach transforms existing community strengths into **scalable power-building assets**.

3. Chronic Stress & Code-Switching Exhaustion Are Undermining Agency

Multiple participants described relentless pressure:

- *“I still gotta produce...”*
- *“I don’t have time to breathe.”*
- *“I need a rest...but I need the money.”*

Others described identity suppression and “behavioral policing:”

- *“I got to be careful...it’s kind of suppression.”*
- *“Thinking about how I show up... shift, deviate, navigate...”*

These are structural barriers—not personal failings.

The Fellowship will:

- Integrate rest, healing practices, and embodied creativity into leadership development.
- Equip participants with tools to name, reduce, and resist the psychosocial burdens of racism.
- Provide space to practice self-expression without consequence.

Leadership cannot flourish under chronic stress. This program restores capacity.

4. Black Men Need Creative, Culturally Grounded Leadership Spaces

Participants said:

- *"We got a lot of incredible thinking power in here."*
- *"I want more of these spaces...uniting the people who are doing the work."*
- *"When Black men gather...we set the future on fire."*

This fellowship cultivates a **pipeline of culturally grounded Black male leaders**.

The Fellowship will:

- Build on Bouldin's creativity frameworks (joy mapping, sensory storytelling, futurist prompts).
 - Create structured cross-generational circles of imagination and problem-solving.
 - Use creative challenges as leadership incubators.
-

Program Structure: What Oishei's Investment Builds

Phase 1 — Fatherhood Leadership Identity & Joy-Based Frameworks (Months 1–3)

- *Sankofa*-based reflection practices
- Emotional literacy through storytelling, sensory art, and narrative play
- Leadership identity exploration
- Creative confidence workshops

Phase 2 — Community Capital & Cultural Power (Months 4–6)

- Mapping networks, community knowledge, and cultural strengths
- Leadership ethics rooted in *Ubuntu*
- Training in systems navigation and asset leveraging
- Peer mentorship teams

Phase 3 — Innovation Studios (Months 7–9)

- "What If" scenario innovation labs
- Collective problem-solving around East Side priorities
- Micro-grants to develop small-scale community prototypes

Phase 4 – Narrative Transformation & Public Impact (Months 10–12)

- Storytelling labs for shifting narratives of Black masculinity
 - Creative outputs (media, installations, campaigns)
 - Community exhibition and leadership showcase
 - Evaluation led by **Magnus Data Consulting** to measure:
 - Emotional literacy gains
 - Social capital expansion
 - Stress reduction indicators
 - Leadership skill growth
 - Community-connectedness
 - Narrative shifts in identity and joy
-

- “What If” scenario innovation labs
- Collective problem-solving around East Side priorities
- Micro-grants to develop small-scale community prototypes

Session III | Lessons Learned

The “Black Men: Build, Bond & Connect” session did far more than convene a group of Black men for dialogue and fitness; it revealed a profound and urgent need for sustained, coordinated investment in Black male leadership development, emotional literacy, and community power building. What occurred in that room was a live demonstration of what becomes possible when Black men are given culturally grounded space to move, reflect, connect, and envision the future together.

The data speak clearly:

- Participants struggled to name or differentiate positive emotions, highlighting a major gap in emotional literacy and well-being.
- Men described chronic stress, survival pressures, and psychological exhaustion from constant code-switching and self-policing in predominantly White spaces.
- Intergenerational mentorship emerged as a critical need, with participants collectively affirming that accountability, guidance, and brotherhood are key drivers of stability and leadership.
- Conversations around systems and power revealed readiness, not just to participate in change, but to build independent systems of ownership, cooperative economics, and shared leadership structures.
- Survey responses showed extremely high levels of inspiration, connection, and willingness to continue the work.

What happened in Daniel Robertson’s session was not episodic; it was indicative of a deeply felt community demand for spaces where Black men can build emotional resilience, sharpen leadership identity, and strengthen collective power.

This is not a “nice-to-have.”

This is preventative care.

This is infrastructure.

This is community power building in real time.

Recommendation: The Brotherhood Leadership & Wellness Cohort (BLWC)

We recommend that the Oishei Foundation invest in transforming this one-off session into a structured, multi-month program:

A 6–9 month integrated leadership, wellness, and power-building model for Black men and young men on Buffalo's East Side.

Why BLWC? What the Data Told Us

1. Emotional Literacy is a Missing Building Block for Leadership & Stability

Participants openly stated they could name more negative emotions than positive ones. Several revealed that they had never been taught the difference between joy, excitement, satisfaction, or contentment.

Recommendation:

Trauma-informed emotional literacy modules facilitated through fitness, storytelling, and group reflection, meeting men where they are and building their emotional vocabulary through practical, culturally relevant activities.

2. Chronic Stress and Identity Policing Are Undermining Mental Health

Quotes revealed pervasive stress, exhaustion, financial pressures, and the burden of constant image management:

"I don't have time to breathe...I still have to go to work."

"I still gotta produce."

"I have to shift how I talk so people don't feel threatened."

These realities directly undermine the Community Power Building pillars of **restoration, resilience, and individual capacity**.

Recommendation:

A wellness-driven leadership model integrating physical activity, restorative practices, guided reflection, and stress management tailored to the lived experiences of Black men.

3. Men Want to Build Systems—Not Just Participate in Them

Participants debated independent Black systems, cooperative ownership, resource pooling, and the need for distributed leadership, not “one hero,” but many lieutenants.

Recommendation:

Cohort-based facilitation that formally trains participants in:

- Collective organizing
 - Succession planning
 - Cooperative economics
 - Policy literacy
 - Systems navigation and systems building
-

4. The Community is Asking for Intergenerational Mentorship

Quotes reflected deep appreciation for older wisdom and younger voices, and a mutual desire for ongoing connection:

“I needed the OGs.”

“We got to build relationships... I’m still here when you’re ready.”

Recommendation:

A structured mentorship pipeline connecting youth, emerging leaders, and seasoned community builders—leveraging Daniel’s established networks through Breaking Barriers and community partnerships.

Program Structure: What Oishei Would Be Funding

Brotherhood Leadership & Wellness Cohort (6–9 Months)

A multi-phase model built around:

» Wellness-Driven Leadership Development

- High-intensity fitness sessions (to reduce stress and build cohesion)
- Emotional literacy workshops
- Guided reflections on masculinity, identity, and well-being

» Power and Systems Education

- Collective ownership training
- Resource-pooling strategies
- Policy understanding and civic engagement
- Leadership readiness and succession planning

» Intergenerational Mentorship Tracks

- Pairing youth (12–24) with adult mentors
- Leadership labs connecting men across ages
- Ongoing relational accountability

» Community Projects & Activation Labs

Small groups will design and launch micro-projects or campaigns tied to economic mobility, narrative change, or mentorship pathways.

» Data-Driven Evaluation by Magnus Data Consulting

Magnus Data Consulting's analytic framework will track:

- Emotional literacy gains
- Leadership identity development
- Social capital expansion
- Stress reduction indicators
- Community engagement outcomes

Movement from *individual voice* → *collective power*

RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY TABLE

Strategic Recommendations	Description
Fatherhood Capacity & Innovation Think Tank	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Leadership capacity-building institute and community think tank that strengthens grassroots WNY organizations• Focus on boys from fatherless homes and increasing healthy father engagement• Fatherhood Leadership Identity & Joy-Based Frameworks
Black Joy Innovation Fellowship (BJIF)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 9–12 month creative leadership & narrative transformation fellowship• Emerged from “Black Joy is Strategy” session• Uses creativity, futurism & storytelling to build emotional capacity• Converts joy into a strategic leadership tool
Brotherhood Leadership & Wellness Cohort (BLWC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Multi-month leadership & wellness program for Black men in Buffalo• Builds on momentum from “Black Men: Build, Bond & Connect”• Focus on emotional wellbeing, leadership identity & community power• Designed to scale from successful pilot session

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FACILITATOR BIOS

Antoine Johnson



Antoine Johnson is a respected fatherhood expert and community leader dedicated to enhancing family dynamics, promoting father involvement, and empowering communities of color. As the Program Success Director for the National Fatherhood Initiative, he supports organizations in effectively engaging fathers.

With over a decade of leadership in human services and youth development, Johnson is an expert in relationship-centered fatherhood programming. As Founder of AJJ Legacy Consulting, he advises agencies on supporting fathers through evidence-based and culturally responsive practices.

Prior to his role at the National Fatherhood Initiative, Johnson was a Program Manager at Buffalo Urban League, enhancing family dynamics and providing caregivers with vital skills. His previous experience includes a Licensed Executive position at the YMCA, focusing on community health and youth development in the Buffalo-Niagara area.

Johnson is deeply committed to community service and capacity building. He has volunteered as a Youth Coordinator with the University at Buffalo BEAM program and served in language services at the University at Buffalo, supporting refugee and immigrant communities.

Johnson holds a B.A. in Human Development and Family Studies from the University at Buffalo, a Project Leadership certificate from Cornell, and credentials in project management and fatherhood coaching.

Johnson, a talented speaker and facilitator, inspires communities through storytelling and deep insights, rooted in faith and family, believing that strong fathers foster bright futures for children and communities.

Johnson is esteemed for his insightful, authentic leadership, uplifting others while promoting healthier, more resilient families.

Daniel Robertson



Najja A. Bouldin, the founding consultant of Phoenix Innovation Group, LLC in Buffalo, New York, inspires audiences through motivational speaking and transformative performance coaching. Renowned for his innate interpersonal skills, he has trained under esteemed faculty and received the Sidney Parnes and Ruth B. Noller Creative Achievement Award. Bouldin crafts and presents workshops on resilience, creativity, and innovation across various sectors, including universities, international organizations, and community agencies.

As a consultant, Bouldin offers workshops, presentations, and training for various clients, including the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus, University at Buffalo, and SUNY Buffalo State, alongside schools and organizations throughout North America, enhancing equity and diversity in the service and business sectors.

Bouldin boasts an impressive academic record, graduating in 2011 with a B.A. in Psychology from SUNY Buffalo, earning honors from the International Society for Leadership and Success and Dean's List recognition. He also holds an A.A.S. in Social Science from Erie Community College, where he was inducted into Phi Theta Kappa and Chi Epsilon Alpha.

Bouldin boasts a rich and varied background. He dedicates time to mentoring college students and volunteering with programs like Upward Bound and Buffalo Public Schools. A former Airman in the U.S. Air Force, he served in Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, earning multiple medals. In his leisure, he enjoys world travel, journaling, exercising, reading, and cooking, exploring destinations like Hawaii, the Dominican Republic, and across the United States.

Bouldin hails from the lower East Side of Buffalo, New York. His profound commitment to integrity, service, and entrepreneurial excellence is significantly inspired by being a father to his wonderful son, Najja Akeem.

Daniel Robertson



Daniel Robertson is a passionate leader in youth development, a mentor, and a community advocate, with a career focused on enhancing opportunities for boys and men of color in Western New York. He founded and serves as the CEO of Latitude 42.8 LLC, a consultancy firm dedicated to empowering individuals and organizations through innovative strategies, mentorship, and capacity-building initiatives.

Robertson is presently the Director of the Boys and Men of Color Initiative at Say Yes Buffalo, where he spearheads initiatives aimed at improving academic achievement, nurturing personal growth, and establishing enduring career pathways for young men throughout the region. Prior to this position, he worked as a Program Manager for the same initiative, playing a pivotal role in expanding programming, fostering community collaborations, and elevating the voices of youth.

Prior to his tenure at Say Yes Buffalo, Robertson amassed a wealth of experience in both education and human services. He dedicated over four years to the Community Action Organization of Western New York, where he took on various positions, including Education Manager, Site Coordinator, and Head Start Education Coordinator. Earlier in his professional journey, he served as a preschool teacher, laying a strong foundation in early childhood development.

Robertson earned a Master of Arts in Organizational Leadership from Medaille University and obtained a Bachelor's Degree in Health and Human Services, focusing on Early Childhood Education, from the University at Buffalo.

Robertson's impact has gained regional recognition, particularly highlighted by his accolade as a Buffalo Business First "30 Under 30" Honoree, honoring his early career successes and contributions to the community.

Known for his passion, mentorship, and unwavering dedication to uplifting young people, Daniel Robertson continues to build spaces where boys and men of color can thrive, lead, and realize their fullest potential.

PRE- & POST-SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRES

Community Conversations: Voices From Fathers of Color Buffalo Surveys

Pre-Survey

1. What is your full name?
2. What is your phone number?
3. What is your email address?
4. Trauma-responsive mentorship principles
5. What is your household size?
6. Do you have any food allergies?
7. What comes to mind when you think of the word “joy”?

Post-Survey

1. How did this experience make you feel? (Check all that apply)
 - Inspired
 - Heard
 - Grounded
 - Challenged (in a good way)
 - Curious
 - Excited and Encouraged
2. What was your biggest “aha” moment or takeaway from this morning?
3. How would you describe the atmosphere of the event in one word?
4. How likely are you to continue engaging with this work (e.g., follow-up sessions, journaling, community action)?
5. How would you like to stay connected to the presenting group and/or Oishei Foundation programs that build on this work?
6. I give permission for my anonymous quotes or reflections as well as pictures/video to be shared in summary reports or materials for the Oishei Foundation.
 - Yes
 - No

PRE- & POST-SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRES

Black Joy is Strategy: Celebrating, Honoring, and Building with Black Men in Buffalo Surveys

Pre-Survey

1. What is your full name?
2. What is your email address?
3. What is your phone number?
4. What is your affiliation or organization?
5. How did you hear about this event?
6. What does Black Joy mean to you?
7. What are you most looking forward to about this experience?
8. Do you have any dietary restrictions?
9. What part of the framework resonates most with you and why?
10. What does equity and joy look like in your daily life or work?
11. How might your presence contribute to this space of healing and creativity?
12. How connected do you currently feel to your sense of joy and purpose?
13. When you think of leadership, what words or images come to mind?
14. How comfortable are you sharing your personal experiences and perspectives in a group setting?
 - Very Comfortable
 - Comfortable
 - Neither Comfortable Nor Uncomfortable
 - Uncomfortable
 - Very Uncomfortable
15. What does “Black Joy” mean to you personally?
16. Have you reviewed the Oishei Foundation’s Racial Equity Framework?
 - Yes, and it resonated deeply with me
 - Yes, I’ve skimmed it
 - No, but I’m interested in learning more
 - Not yet, but I plan to before the event
17. (If yes) Which part of the Oishei Framework most aligns with your personal or professional life?
18. What’s one word or phrase that describes what you hope to carry forward from this experience?

Black Joy is Strategy: Celebrating, Honoring, and Building with Black Men in Buffalo Surveys

Pre-Survey

1. What is your full name?
2. What is your email address?
3. What is your phone number?
4. What is your affiliation or organization?
5. How did you hear about this event?
6. What does Black Joy mean to you?
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11. How might your presence contribute to this space of healing and creativity?
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 - Uncomfortable
 - Very Uncomfortable
15. What does “Black Joy” mean to you personally?
16. Have you reviewed the Oishei Foundation’s Racial Equity Framework?
 - Yes, and it resonated deeply with me
 - Yes, I’ve skimmed it
 - No, but I’m interested in learning more
 - Not yet, but I plan to before the event
17. (If yes) Which part of the Oishei Framework most aligns with your personal or professional life?
18. What’s one word or phrase that describes what you hope to carry forward from this experience?

Black Joy is Strategy (*continued*)

Post-Survey

1. How did this experience make you feel?
2. What was your biggest “aha” moment or takeaway from the work?
3. How would you describe the atmosphere of the event?
4. Which part of the session resonated most with you?
 - Icebreaker: *“What Does Joy Taste Like?”*
 - Innovation Fitness Session: *Phoenix-to-Phoenix*
 - Dialogue Pods: *Pressure, Power, Peace*
 - Collective Data Wall: *What We Know, What We Need*
5. How confident do you feel applying ideas or insights from this workshop to your daily life or leadership?
 - Very Confident
 - Confident
 - Neutral
 - Not Confident
 - Not Very Confident
6. Which value or theme from the session will you carry forward?
7. How likely are you to continue engaging with this work (e.g., follow-up sessions, journaling, community action)?
 - Very Likely
 - Likely
 - Neutral
 - Unlikely
 - Very Unlikely
8. Would you like to stay connected to Phoenix Innovation Group or Oishei Foundation programs that build on this work?
9. What feedback do you have for improving or expanding this experience in the future?
10. Optional: Share a quote or reflection we may use (with your permission) to inspire others in future events.
11. “I give permission for my anonymous quotes or reflections to be shared in summary reports or materials for the Oishei Foundation.”
 - Yes
 - No

What is your email address?

Black Men: Build, Bond & Connect Surveys

Pre-Survey

1. What is your first name?
2. What is your last name?
3. What is your affiliation or organization?
4. What is your age?
5. What is your email address?
6. What is your phone number?
7. What is your ZIP code?
8. How did you hear about this event?
9. Did you review the Oishei Framework One Pager and Presentation?
 - Yes, and it resonated deeply with me
 - Yes, I've skimmed it
 - No, but I'm interested in learning more
 - Not yet, but I plan to before the event
10. What part of the Oishei Framework resonated with you the most and why?
11. When you think of "Black Joy" what comes to mind?
12. How closely connected do you feel to your sense of joy and purpose?
 - Closely Connected
 - Connected
 - Neutral
 - Disconnected
 - Very Disconnected
13. What do you think is needed for black men to thrive in Buffalo?
14. What does it mean to you to have power and what does it look like in your life?
15. How comfortable are you with sharing personal experiences and perspectives in a group setting?
 - Very Comfortable
 - Comfortable
 - Neither Comfortable Nor Uncomfortable
 - Uncomfortable
 - Very Uncomfortable
16. What is one thing you hope to take away from this experience?

Black Men: Build, Bond & Connect (*continued*)

Post-Survey

1. Use one word to describe the atmosphere of the event
2. How did this experience make you feel? (Check all that apply)
 - Appreciated
 - Challenged (in a good way)
 - Curious
 - Energized
 - Grounded
 - Heard
 - Inspired
 - Seen
 - Valued
 - Other
3. Which part of the session resonated with you the most?
 - The "Introductions" Activity
 - The Fitness "Joy-Inspired" BootCamp
 - The "Black Joy Healing & Systems" Group Activity
 - The "Joy: A Sensory Exploration" Group Activity
 - The "Electricity" Icebreaker
 - The "Meaning of Power" Discussion
 - The Closing Circle, Reflections & Affirmations
4. How have your thoughts around joy shifted as a result of attending this event?
5. How likely are you to continue engaging this work (e.g., follow-up sessions, journaling, community action)?
 - Very Likely
 - Likely
 - Neutral
 - Unlikely
 - Very Unlikely
6. What feedback do you have for improving or expanding this experience in the future?
7. *Optional*: Share a quote or reflection we may use (with your permission) to inspire others in the future.
8. *"I give permission for my anonymous quotes or reflections to be shared in summary reports or materials for the Oishei Foundation."*
 - Yes
 - No