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# It Takes a Village

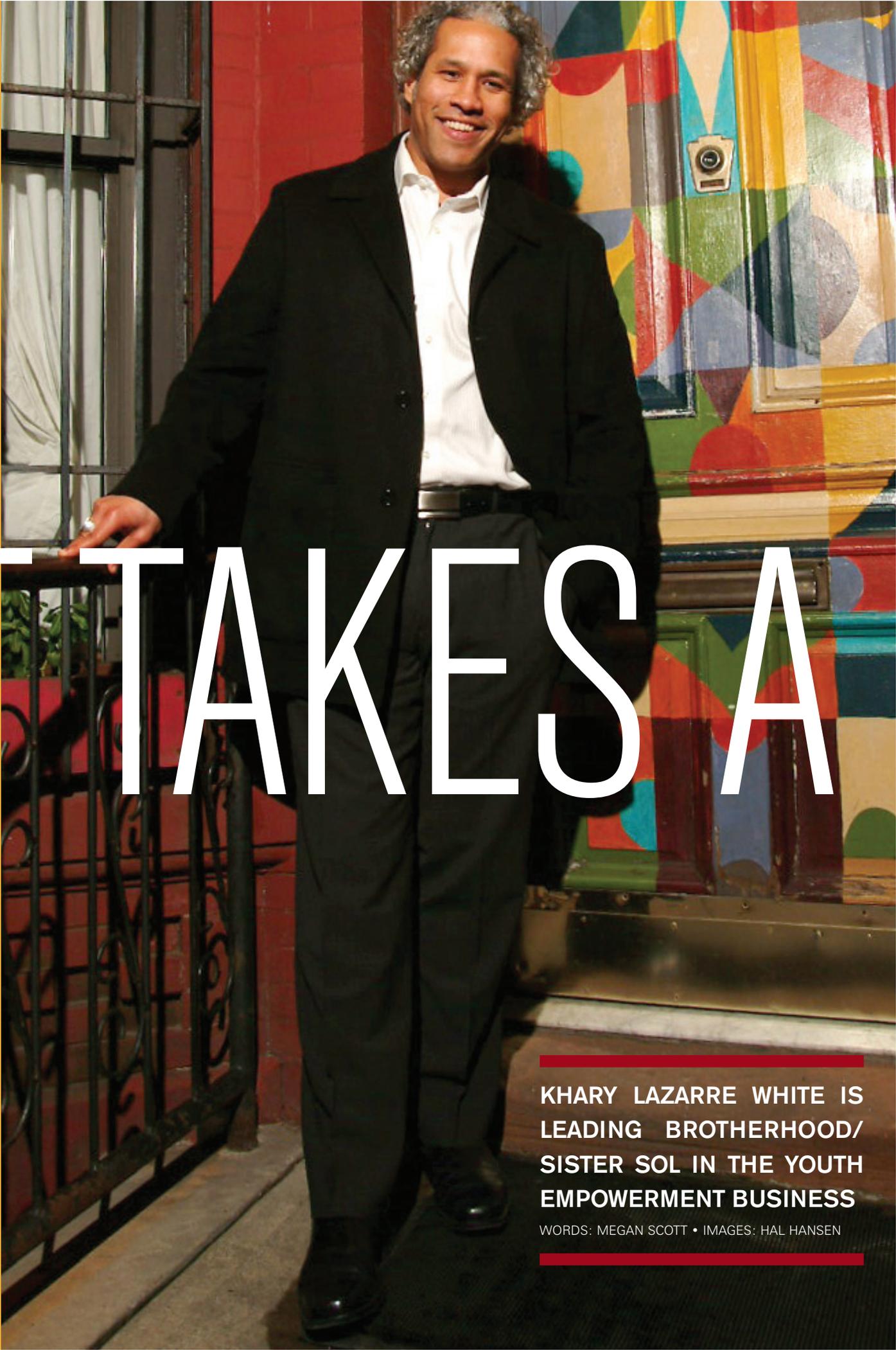
**KHARY LAZARRE WHITE IS LEADING BROTHERHOOD/SISTER SOL**

**IN THE YOUTH EMPOWERMENT BUSINESS**

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**KHARY LAZARRE WHITE IS  
LEADING BROTHERHOOD/  
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EMPOWERMENT BUSINESS**

WORDS: MEGAN SCOTT • IMAGES: HAL HANSEN

It was a building she passed nearly every day. But Zora Howard never bothered to venture inside the Harlem brownstone until the summer after her freshman year in high school when she was looking for something to do.

Howard quenched her curiosity about the colorful building that seemed out of place in the neighborhood when she joined The Brotherhood/Sister Sol's Liberation program, which trains young people to be community leaders. What was supposed to be a summer has turned into years with the organization and has taken her to Brazil, inspired her to work with young

gram, which started as The Brotherhood, graduate high school at twice the rate of a similar population in New York City, according to one of the founders. Graduates of the program have gone on to become engineers, registered nurses, published writers and business owners, says associate director Cidra Sebastien, 31, of Brooklyn.

to members round-the-clock, seven days a week.

Many of the youth are from poor backgrounds, such as Antwon Allen, 21, who grew up in the Drew Hamilton projects in Harlem. Now a junior at Howard University studying civil engineering, Allen first got involved with the organization when he

# VILLAGE

people, and instilled in her a sense of "I can do anything."

Now 17, Howard, a freshman at Yale, calls the building her second home. "Once you join, you're part of a family," Howard says. "It's a part of your life from that point on."

## The Program

While there are many organizations with programs designed to reverse the challenges facing black and Latino youth, The Brotherhood/Sister Sol non-profit organization seems to have found a formula that works. Members of the 15-year-old pro-

gram, which started in 1995, Bro/Sis—as it's called—has helped hundreds of youth, sending them on month-long international excursions, teaching them Pan-African and Latino history, developing their leadership skills, offering college guidance, academic tutoring and internships. It's a holistic approach, one that even offers free legal representation to young people who run afoul of the law.

The organization, which has a waiting list, works with 250 youth a year, ages seven-to-22 and offers six-year rites-of-passage programs, after-school programming, summer camps and home counseling. Staff members are available

was in the eighth grade. He met his future chapter leader, Jacques Louis, on the basketball court. Once after a game, Louis told all of the boys to link arms and shout out "Brotherhood."

Allen was moved. "That definitely empowered me and I could believe in stuff. I could have pride in myself. I could trust in people."

Through the program, Allen has also traveled—to Ghana and Brazil. He has also gone on numerous wilderness retreats, and, during high school, went on two college tours. He also helped design the organization's community garden while learning about botany.



Brotherhood wilderness retreat

He admits before Bro/Sis, he had never even heard of the Scholastic Aptitude Test—better known as the SAT. Now he is the first person in his family on his mother’s side to go to college. At Bro/Sis he had a voice for the first time. “We would sit in group circles and have discussions,” he says. “Our opinions were respected. They’re very willing to listen to you no matter what you have to say. They’re willing to help you.”

## The Team

There’s no doubt that Bro/Sis has achieved more than many other non-profits. Besides a four-floor building, there’s a 24-member board of directors that includes a former Wall Street Journal reporter, the general counsel for Gospel Music Channel (gmc) television network and an advertising sales executive for MTV Networks. Even more impressive are the 16 full-time staff members who go through a rigorous interview process before they are hired. One third of the staff are alums of the program, which speaks to the organization’s success.

“This organization is a haven,” says board member Nicole Valentine-Moody, 33, president and chief strategy officer for Synergy Business Development Inc., whose office is in Harlem. “When young people need help getting into colleges, when they need help with transportation around the city, when they need help finding an internship or a job, we as the board are ambassadors making sure we provide the resources and opportunities for that to be possible.”

The program works because of the leadership, she says. This is beyond a career for them. It’s a calling. “I think when you see your work as a life service, you find a way to feed the community and you eat last.” That’s a salute to the organization’s founders.

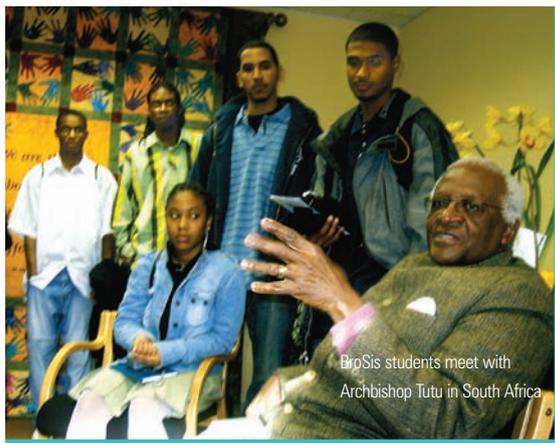
Khary Lazarre-White and his childhood friend Jason Warwin conceived the idea of Bro/Sis when they were seniors at Brown University in 1994. They started with 15 Latino and African American males on the south side of Providence, RI, at the John Hope Community Center. Within one year, they had helped steer

all but one of the young men away from criminal behavior and back to school.

The seed for The Brotherhood was planted. “We felt literally something had to be done to help young men survive,” Lazarre-White says. “We felt we had an innovative approach.”

The two brought the successful model to New York City in 1995 and incorporated The Brotherhood as a non-profit organization. They started with 45 young men in two public schools – one was Warwin’s former high school, Central Park East in East Harlem, and over the next three years, they hired additional staff and doubled the number of young people in the program. Warwin has since moved to Brazil and recently started two Brotherhood chapters outside the city of Salvador de Bahia.

The Brotherhood expanded to include sisters, under the direction of Susan Wilcox, in 1998. Wilcox now coordinates Liberating Voices/Liberating Minds, the organization’s publications and professional development initiative. The organization purchased its building in



Bro/Sis students meet with Archbishop Tutu in South Africa



Bro/Sis students are caretakers for this community garden adjacent to their Harlem building.



Sister Sol students at wilderness retreat



Sister Sol students push past their limits on retreat



Students join drum ceremony in Brazil

1999 and moved into the renovated brownstone the following year. It bought the adjacent lot in 2007 to construct a 16,000 square-foot building. Bro/Sis is also the steward for the lot on the opposite side, which is one of the city's "Greenthumb Gardens."

The building is a welcoming place—not just in terms of the environment but also the staff, says associate director Wendy DeJesus. A young person comes in the door, gets hugs and is asked, "How was your day?" Staff members are genuinely interested in the response.

Inside the 4,000-square-foot building are a teen lounge adorned with pennants from the colleges that alums have attended, a technology center, a black and Latino history library, a mind, body and spirit room for yoga, boxing and arts and crafts. The thick walls are covered with artwork from alums and donors, inspirational quotes and posters.

Next door, the garden has crops that are used in the children's meals, a greenhouse, a gazebo and a climbing wall all built by students. Students are so com-

fortable in the space they walk around without shoes.

"As soon as I went there, people were smiling at me, open and wanting to know who I was. I felt comfortable," Allen says. Sebastien says the program's success formula is relatively simple. "They know they will always have a group of people who will have their back," she says of the youth. "So whether it's someone who is going to give them the 'hip-hip hooray' when they've done well, or someone who is going to give them the foot in the behind, they know they can speak to folks about anything and everything. People want to help you and do what's in your best interest."

Paul Butler, 41, general counsel for gmc television network and chair of the board says of the founders: "To their credit, their vision for how the organization was going to be different and also make a difference was clear."

## The Impact

Bro/Sis is like a family, says Marsha Jean-Charles, 22, of Brooklyn. One of her

fondest memories of the program was in Ghana, when her peers helped her climb behind the Wli waterfalls – she's not a good swimmer – and sit on the rocks. Like Howard, Jean-Charles, a senior at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, started with the Liberation program in 2004. She now facilitates the program in the summer, teaching young people about activism. Jean-Charles, whose family is originally from Haiti, said the Liberation program "widened my view on how much the world needed help, how much black and Latinos especially needed help." She decided to major in African American studies and hopes to get a doctorate in Africana studies.

"I think one of the primary things it did is to help me believe in myself and what I can do as a young person, as a black woman, as a child of immigrants," she says. "It helped me realize my life goal of helping oppressed people in whatever way I can."

## The Funds

DeJesus, who has been working with the organization for 10 years, reinforces the

notion that the staff makes the difference. “We really care about the whole individual—not just about ‘Let me make sure this child is doing well in school,’” she says. “I always feel like one of the things people need are other adults outside their family to better support them.”

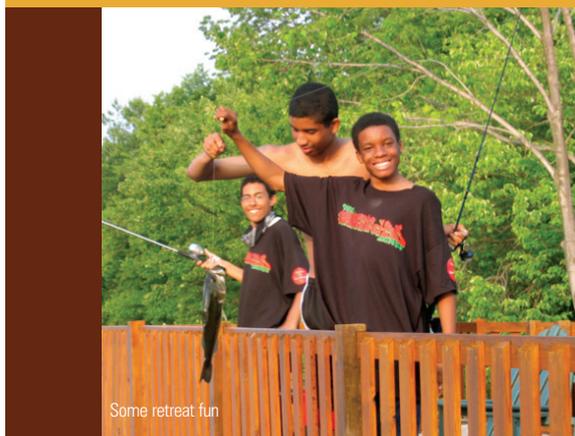
While Bro/Sis has been featured on “The Oprah Winfrey Show,” “NBC Nightly News” and in other media out-

gramming (Lazarre-White and Warwin stayed with family). Over the next year, they raised \$170,000. Their friends and families connected them with influential leaders; they met with board members from several foundations. The success—higher GPAs and now college-bound young men—helped them to secure more funding.

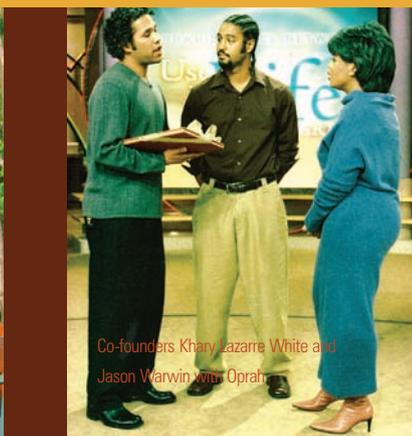
The organization’s big annual fundraiser

Roland Martin and actress Joy Bryant was a presenter.

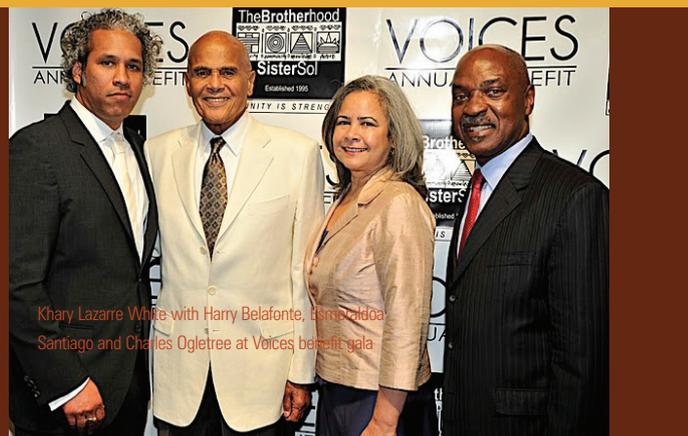
“There are not that many groups that are working with black and brown children, doing it with a full-time staff and achieving results,” says Lazarre-White. “Because of that, we’re able to get some of the funding we need. We still have to struggle very hard to raise it.”



Some retreat fun



Co-founders Khary Lazarre White and Jason Warwin with Oprah



Khary Lazarre White with Harry Belafonte, Esmeralda Santiago and Charles Ogletree at Voices benefit gala

lets, including the *New York Times* and *Essence* magazine and on more than 50 national and local radio programs, Lazarre-White, an attorney with a law degree from Yale, doesn’t encourage everyone to start a non-profit. The program costs \$2 million a year to run, which requires a full-time effort.

“I think a lot of people think of it as a side-hustle,” says Lazarre-White. “A lot of time folks: celebrities, artists and actors don’t realize it’s a full operation. It’s a non-profit organization, just like a for-profit business.”

Funding for the first year was \$20,000—a grant, which paid salaries and pro-

is a dinner/awards show called Voices. Last year it honored Harry Belafonte,

**“At its core, our approach is about helping young people develop a moral and ethical code—a guide by which to live their lives.”**

Harvard law professor Charles Ogletree and author, screenwriter and essayist Esmeralda Santiago. The host was CNN’s

For example, not enough money was raised to go to Ghana last year, Jean-Charles says. For the international trips, the students are supposed to raise \$300 of the \$3,500 cost and attend weekly workshops for six months to learn about the history, the people and the culture of the place they are planning to visit.

While fundraising is easily the biggest challenge, Lazarre-White remains deeply committed to growing the program. It’s no surprise considering he was raised by activist-parents in Manhattan who took an interest in politics, such as women’s rights and the Civil Rights Movement. His father has worked in government for 40 years, serving as New York City commissioner of labor services and personnel and New York state

commissioner of human rights—among other positions. As a child, he attended demonstrations with his parents. During the summer, he coached basketball for Harlem youth.

He has edited several Bro/Sis books, including “The Brotherhood Speaks,” “Voices of The Brotherhood/Sister Sol” and “Off the Subject: The Words of the Lyrical Circle of The Brotherhood/Sister

## The Inspiration

The program gets support from people who in particular want to help black and Latino males, two groups that suffer higher incarceration and dropout rates than their white counterparts. One of those was DaMond Taylor, 40, a chapter leader and after-school program facilitator who works with young men ages 16-to-18.

a billion-dollar company. She used to accompany her father on his philanthropic missions and she herself has been donating to the organization for years. She now works to find new sponsors.

“At its core, our approach is about helping young people develop a moral and ethical code—a guide by which to live their lives,” says Lazarre-White. “This guide allows them to make good



Sol” (collections of young people’s writings). This year alone, he has addressed dozens of organizations, including a black men’s think tank, and audiences at the University of Florida, Harvard University and Educational Testing Services (ETS).

To help spread its success, Bro/Sis has trained more than 350 educators from more than 60 schools and non-profits across the country. It has published its curriculum, in 2006 “Brother, Sister, Leader: The Official Curriculum of The Brotherhood/Sister Sol,” and in 2009, “Why Did This Happen: Content, Perspective, Dialogue: A Workshop Model for Developing Young people’s Reflective Writing.”

The biggest challenge he says is keeping them inspired. “Getting them to be conscious about decisions that they make, following through on anything from school to showing up for meetings, making sure they’re getting their school work done,” Taylor says. “Another challenge is really getting at the heart of the matter, whatever’s holding them back. A lot of it is a lack of confidence that things can be different, that they can make things different for themselves.”

Christina Lewis, 30, a new board member who wrote for the Wall Street Journal, has been a consistent supporter. She is the daughter of the late Reginald F. Lewis, the first African American to build

decisions and become strong women and men.”

Howard says she wishes she had walked inside the building earlier. But she is thankful her curiosity prodded her to open the door. She thought it was going to be a summer thing, but it turned into a lifetime.

“It just put things in perspective,” she says. “I guess if all you’ve been exposed to is where you are, then it’s very easy to get caught up in thinking the only thing that exists is your immediate community, the people on your block, down your block. There’s a lot of world out there.” *nv*

Megan Scott is a freelance writer. She is based in Melbourne, FL.