



2023 Impact Report

INTRODUCTION

The second inaugural Black Boys & Men Symposium was held on June 14-16. We had 350 registered attendees, a 22 percent increase over last year. The two-day symposium provided space for guests to interrogate and dismantle systems that oppress Black boys and men and rebuild for their success.



OPENING KEYNOTE ADDRESS

This year, the symposium kicked off on Wednesday evening with an opening keynote address by Dr. Adolph Brown III, an author, researcher, educational and clinical psychologist, entrepreneur, and influential thinker/practitioner. Dr. Brown asked attendees to be self-reflective, to think about who they are before identifying their reason for what they do (often referred to as their “why”). In doing this, Dr. Brown directed everyone to take time to assess their backpack, or the baggage they carry around. This baggage weighs on each of us, and as we try to help others, we can unknowingly “serve” that baggage to others. In order to assist Black boys and men without harming them with our own baggage, we need to acknowledge what’s in our backpack and work to let it go.

BREAKOUT SESSIONS AND FEATURED PRESENTERS

Between Thursday and Friday, attendees had the opportunity to attend seven choice sessions out of 35 that were offered as well as one featured presentation. This gave attendees a variety of topics to choose from, including mentoring, confronting masculinity, cultural responsiveness, K-12 education, higher education, constructing narratives, equitable education, highlighting assets, identity, and leadership. During breaks, attendees also had an opportunity to visit vendor booths and support Black entrepreneurs.





SNEAKER BALL

On Thursday night, symposium attendees and community members gathered for the Sneaker Ball, a “soleful” party with a purpose. They put on their formal attire and donned their best pair of sneakers to enjoy a night of food, meaningful monologues, and dancing. Dominique Mary Davis provided entertainment during dinner. The program included a presentation on Grand Valley State University’s Office of Multicultural affairs, which was the recipient of the funds raised during the Sneaker Ball. In addition, the program included two meaningful monologues from Shannon Cohen and Daniel Williams. Cohen shared her experience as a mom to a Black boy and the need to protect his peace and joy from hope stealers. A self-proclaimed hope dealer, Cohen asked the audience to help protect the peace and joy of Black boys so they can continue to dream big. Williams took a communal approach to his meaningful monologue, using the Zulu principle of *ubuntu* (“I am because we are”) as his



theme. Williams asked the audience to live each day like it’s someone else’s last day. He argued that we become more whole when we recognize that we are a person through other people. Thus, we should be less self-centered, living our lives with humanity towards others.

CLOSING KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Bakari Sellers, a New York Times best-selling author, attorney, Civil Rights activist, and legislator, provided the closing keynote address. He shared a personal story about his father’s Civil Rights activism. Sellers’ message to the audience was to love your neighbors even when they don’t love you. We need to meet people where they’re at, and sometimes that requires giving someone else some grace. It’s important to do our best so we can be the example for others. This is especially true for Black boys and men. They need to see successful Black boys and men to know that they can also be successful.





CALL TO ACTION

Following Sellers' presentation, a panel of West Michigan leaders, facilitated by Grand Valley President Philomena V. Mantella, closed out the symposium with a call to action. New this year, attendees were provided with a participant workbook, a tool to help them think about how to take action as a result of the information learned throughout the symposium. In the workbook, attendees were asked to focus on four areas of action – elevate and educate, promote, participate, and support. Panelists further explained how attendees could act on the knowledge they gained. Joe Jones, president and CEO of The Hekima Group LLC, stressed the importance of being intentional with our actions. The change we want will not occur through happenstance. Eric Brown, president and CEO of the Urban League of



West Michigan, told attendees to tap into what's already happening. Organizations like the Urban League of West Michigan are champions of similar work, so rather than duplicate efforts or compete with good work that is being done, participants can help existing organizations further their missions. A principal in the Kentwood Public Schools district, Lorenzo Bradshaw shared that the Black Boys & Men Symposium showed him the need for more professional development for his staff. Employers need to prioritize professional development centered on the themes of this symposium if change is to occur. Finally, B. Donta Truss, vice president for enrollment development and educational outreach at Grand Valley, invited attendees to join a Black Boys & Men Symposium working group to help create change in one of the four focus areas in the call to action.

CONCLUSION

The second annual Black Boys & Men Symposium was a huge success. Attendance grew by 22 percent, meaning we reached a wider audience than last year. A participant workbook and a call to action were developed to have attendees focus their learning on ways they can create change in their own work. We look forward to hearing how attendees have transformed their work as a result of the symposium.

Please hold June 12-14, 2024 for the third annual Black Boys & Men Symposium. We expect next year to be even bigger and better.