



Youspeak Radio Episode 6 – Do Your Part – With Phill Wilson

Audio transcript

Full audio: <https://www.onearchives.org/youspeak-radio-ep-6-do-your-part-phill-wilson/>

Speaker 1 ([00:00](#)):

This is Youspeak Radio, a project by ONE Archives Foundation with generous support from the California Humanities.

Jay Vargas-Garcia ([00:15](#)):

Hi, my name is Jaileen Vargas-Garcia and my pronouns are she, they, and I usually go by Jay. This is my interview with Phill Wilson, a trailblazer and the founder of the Black AIDS Institute and personally, to me, it felt like an honor to interview him. He was amiable. He was very accepting and he's very confident. And throughout this interview, it made me feel more confident and made me feel less nervous.

Phill Wilson ([00:45](#)):

I found myself as a 24 year old being told that he had six months to live. So, the thing that I probably would have told myself, my younger self, is you have time, use it.

Jay Vargas-Garcia ([01:09](#)):

My purpose for this interview was to make it feel less intimidating and more just like having a conversation with a friend. I wanted to bring out the humanity and not just the statistics of the AIDS/HIV epidemic, to show you someone who lived through it, and is here today to tell you the story. So thank you so much and I really hope you enjoy it.

Phill Wilson ([01:44](#)):

Okay. My name is Phill Wilson. I am the founder of the Black AIDS Institute and the immediate past president and CEO. I currently am the vice chair on the board of the Foundation for AIDS Monument. And I also sit on the board of trustees for amfAR.

Jay Vargas-Garcia ([02:05](#)):

Okay, great. So, my first question is what was it like being a gay black man with AIDS in the mid '80s? And how do you think that shaped who you are as an adult today?

Phill Wilson ([02:19](#)):

For me, I came out in the spring of 1980 and my entire lived experience as an adult gay or otherwise has been in the middle of the battlefield of HIV/AIDS, pandemic. Everything about my experience, every life passage, every love, every heartbreak, every victory, every defeat, every laughter, every tear, HIV sometimes has been in the background, sometimes center stage, but AIDS has always been there. So, my life as a gay man has centered around maneuvering, living with, fighting the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Jay Vargas-Garcia ([03:07](#)):



Thank you for that very eloquent response. It was very well thought out. It was very descriptive. To progress onto my next question, do you think that's what made you want to start the Black AIDS Institute or was it something else?

Phill Wilson ([03:22](#)):

Well, I started the Black AIDS Institute for a number of reasons. We began the work on the Black AIDS Institute in 1997 and 1998. And the official launch basically the end of 1998, the beginning of 1999. In 1996, I became very, very, very ill with HIV after 16 years of living with HIV, I was infected in 1980, and eventually had to stop working. The good news for me was that in 1996 was the time where protease inhibitors and the now famous cocktails were being developed and approved by the FDA. And so I was able to go on those cocktails. And by 1998, I was feeling much better. And beginning to think it was time for me to go back to work. Once I made that decision and I started to look around to see what was going on in 1998 and 1999, I discovered that there existed a very, very, very large gap regarding HIV and AIDS and people of color in general and HIV and AIDS regarding black people specifically.

Phill Wilson ([04:46](#)):

And by 1998 and 1999, there was so much science involved in AIDS work, whether or not you were a prevention worker or a treatment advocate or a social worker or an outreach worker, that science mattered. And so, the Black AIDS Institute, which is a primarily a think tank that focuses on public policy advocacy, education awareness training from a uniquely and unapologetically black point of view, we created the Black AIDS Institute to fit that gap. To first and foremost engage black people no matter where they were. And secondly, to raise the HIV science literacy in black communities because we believe that if people had a better understanding of the science of HIV, they were better positioned to protect themselves, more likely to adhere to treatments and medications, and more able to influence public policy.

Jay Vargas-Garcia ([05:51](#)):

Wow, that's a really big thing that you created and I know that it still like affects people today and that there are some people who, without you and creating this institution, would have probably never found out and probably would have continued to suffer. So, I read an article where you said that you stepped down as CEO of the Black AIDS Institute. Why is that?

Phill Wilson ([06:19](#)):

I decided to step down as the presidency and CEO of the Black AIDS Institute because, back then it was 2018, today is 2021, was because I believe that there are different skills necessary to fight HIV and AIDS in 2021. So, HIV and AIDS was one thing in 1981. It was a different thing in 1991. It was a different thing in 2001 and 2011. And it is yet a different thing in 2021. And the skills that were needed, I believe, in 1981 were skills that were a part of my wheelhouse. I think between 1981 and 2018, that I was able to tone those skills. I was able to expand my wheelhouse so that I was able to be an effective leader and a servant. I believe today that different skills are required, different lived experience is required, and I wanted to make room for that to happen.

Jay Vargas-Garcia ([07:32](#)):



Okay. That makes complete sense, right? As time progresses, time changes, people do different things and it requires fresher mindset or a new mindset to continue evolving. Now to move things a little lighter, if you would think this question is lighter, as a teenager, myself, I'm 16, right? You're kind of like this wise older person, you've walked through many paths of lives, you met many different people, you've done lots of things with your life. And personally, something that I think is wonderful is when you find a connection with one person throughout your life or multiple people, right? So my question for you now is have you ever fallen in love? And if so, how do I phrase this, either what's your best memory with them? Or what do you hold dearly to you about them?

Phill Wilson ([08:27](#)):

I think a question that asks, have you ever fallen in love is certainly a 16 year old question. I'm 65. So, the answer, thank God that yes, I fallen in love on more than one occasion. My first partner actually I met when I was 24 years old, literally as I was coming out. My first sexual encounter with a man turned into a 10 year relationship until we lost him to HIV and AIDS in 1989. And I think that the most important thing I learned from that relationship and every relationship subsequent to that is intimate, emotional, romantic relationships, at least for me, are about finding home, feeling safe, building safety.

Phill Wilson ([09:34](#)):

Regardless of who you are, regardless of race and gender or sexual orientation or age or religion or country of origin, I think that human beings are constantly seeking and searching to be safe. And that's what love represents, knowing that no matter what happens that there is someone who is going to try to take care of you. And so, what I've discovered for me with regard to that is number one, that that is in great part what love is, but number two, that in order to find safety, you have to offer safety. And that the love roadmap, if you will, the emotional intimacy roadmap, involves as much seeking as it is seeking to give.

Jay Vargas-Garcia ([10:43](#)):

Wow. I've never thought of it like that because as a teenager, you're just be told like, "Oh, you'll fall in love eventually. Love always comes." But you never know what to expect, right?

Phill Wilson ([10:55](#)):

I think that's true. You never know what to expect. And I think that that continues to be true with age. My mother recently died. She was 85 and she and my father were married for 65 years. And so someone asked my mother what's the secret of a long-term relationship. And my mother said, "Listen to him." And this was a young woman that was asking my mother this question. And so she says, "But what if he's wrong?" And my mother said, "Listen to him." And the young woman said, "Well, what if you disagree?" And my mother said, "Listen to him." And she said, "What if he doesn't listen?" And my mother said, "Listen to him." And so eventually the young woman said, "Oh, I think I get it."

Phill Wilson ([12:00](#)):

And now I think that there are so many answers that can be found in the process of listening. And I think that often, regardless of the nature of the relationship, we don't listen, we prepare for our response, but we don't listen. And so, regardless of what age you are, I think that to the question of love, that is the fundamental secret or at least it was a formula that worked for 65 years for my parents.



Jay Vargas-Garcia ([12:43](#)):

That's beautiful. So, next question. So, I'm a queer youth, correct? And I know a lot of people probably were like, "What do you have to say to the youth? What do you have to say to the youth?" Which is why I'm asking it, right? What advice do you have to queer youth in general? Or maybe just to me. And if you could say something to your younger self, when you were first coming out, what would you say to them?

Jay Vargas-Garcia ([13:12](#)):

Well, let's start with a latter. Fortunately, I have a lived experience that hopefully you won't have in that I found myself as a 24 year old being told that he had six months to live. So, the thing that I probably would have told myself, my younger self, is you have time, use it. So, that's what I would have said to my younger self.

Jay Vargas-Garcia ([13:50](#)):

So, to the question, what would I say to a young person today? I would say that do not short change your power and do not underestimate the responsibility of having that power. Many people who sit in positions of leadership... and what people don't understand is that leadership is a temporal tenant/renter relationship. It's not an owner relationship. And what that means is that you are a leader for a period of time and then, someone else becomes a leader in the same way that there's someone else who was the leader before you became the leader. And so, what I would say to young people is to remember that every leader in the history of the human experiment at one point in time was young, at one point in time had all the insecurities that you may or may not have and then some. And that even with those insecurities, people can find a way, you can find a way to contribute significantly or most importantly, to do your part, whatever that is. We only have a capacity to do our part, but we have a responsibility to do at least that much.

Jay Vargas-Garcia ([15:53](#)):

Well, great, yeah. That's really profound advice and advice that honestly I could use right now to more lighter and happier things. What's what do you think is something that brought you joy during your hardest times in life?

Phill Wilson ([16:11](#)):

Joy is a very interesting concept and question for me at this point in my life. I don't know if I've mastered it. I guess... I don't know if I've mastered joy, but I have master gratefulness. And so I would have to respond to the question about what has given me joy with really the question of gratefulness. And for me, what I am eternally and forever grateful for is that I have been able to live a life where I have been afforded the luxury of getting up in the morning and attempting to make a difference. Not always being successful, but to have the privilege of being allowed, to attempt to make a difference is a remarkable gift. And I am grateful for having been given that gift by whomever gave that gift to me.

Jay Vargas-Garcia ([17:29](#)):

Great. Thank you so much for like doing this interview with me.

Phill Wilson ([17:33](#)):



You're welcome. This was very

Jay Vargas-Garcia ([17:35](#)):

Like insightful both into your life and just into life in general, I would say,

Phill Wilson ([17:41](#)):

Well, thank you very, very much. I appreciate so much you doing this work.

Jay Vargas-Garcia ([17:46](#)):

Thank you so much.

Speaker 1 (outro) ([17:47](#)):

This is Youspeak Radio. We are Cassidy All, Savi Bindass, Dean Campbell, Gabriel DuBransky, Jaileen Vargas-Garcia, Téa Wagstaff, Erik Adamian, and Umi Hsu. A project by ONE Archives Foundation with generous support from the California Humanities.