BRENDAN WARD, CONTEXT PARTNERS

THE BME COMMUNITY

The roots of reciprocity

In 2013, Trabian Shorters came to Context Partners with a bold idea. Design an unconventional fellowship that changes the narrative of Black men in America by recognizing them as the community builders they've always been.

Five years in, the Community Genius Fellowship was facing a dilemma: how does Shorters secure funding and support to scale the fellowship across more U.S. cities? While traditional fellowships measure success in hard numbers, BMe's grassroots impact in social justice work is tougher to measure. Still, its value in enabling neighborhood-level change has been palpable and persistently endorsed by its Fellows. Shorters asked Context Partners to cultivate success stories from the Fellows themselves, and draw critical insights between the fellowship's design and the pivotal, ripple-effect change that these leaders are achieving.

I like to come into discovery interviews with as close a connection to the person I'm about to talk to as I can; I have just a few minutes to capture their perspective. I read any background materials and articles I can find, things like where they grew up, the work they do day to day, and the values that guide them. I put a photo of them in front of me before the conversation begins, and I even check out a street view of their work space courtesy of Google Earth.

I spoke with 20 BMe Fellows overall—short, passionate conversations in the tiny sliver of their day they could offer. I was struck by the Fellows' unfiltered candor as they described an initiative they were proud of. Each man described who they were "before BMe," and "after BMe," noting how the experience has forever changed how they lead. It got me curious—what is it about the BMe experience that creates this powerful influence and sparks each one's desire to practice reciprocity: to give back in equal measure? I landed on three insights.

Invest in assets vs. mitigating deficits

In the U.S., there's an acute lack of investment in Black male leaders, particularly from an asset mindset. Instead, leaders who seek funding are asked for narratives of what's wrong in their community, rather than what's possible or already present. These deficit-framed narratives are intended to incite action and investment by supporters, but they also have a powerful stigmatizing effect.

To shift that narrative, Shorters put asset framing at the center of the Fellows' experience, right from the moment they apply for its $10,000 award. "Tell us what you'll do with the money"—that's the core question applicants answer. Its simplicity is subtle, but it shifts the conversation entirely. Applicants talk about their vision for change, rather than the bleak state of now.

Asset framing is the shift to narratives that define someone by what they can offer the world. All of the Fellows receive deep training in asset framing as well, to help them shift their personal narrative. That creates powerful moments that unify the Fellows. Most of them don't realize how much their deficit framing has influenced them until Shorters reveals what it is and how it might have affected their entire lives.

Fellows described having this "oh wow" moment. They realize, I shouldn't have had to feel lucky to not have been evicted from my home, or to not have my whole community pushed out of a particular neighborhood. I should be seen as a contributing, valuable member of a community just by virtue of existing. Some say the asset framing mindset lets them be themselves for the first time. It's one reason the program changed its name from Black Male Engagement to simply BMe: "Be me."

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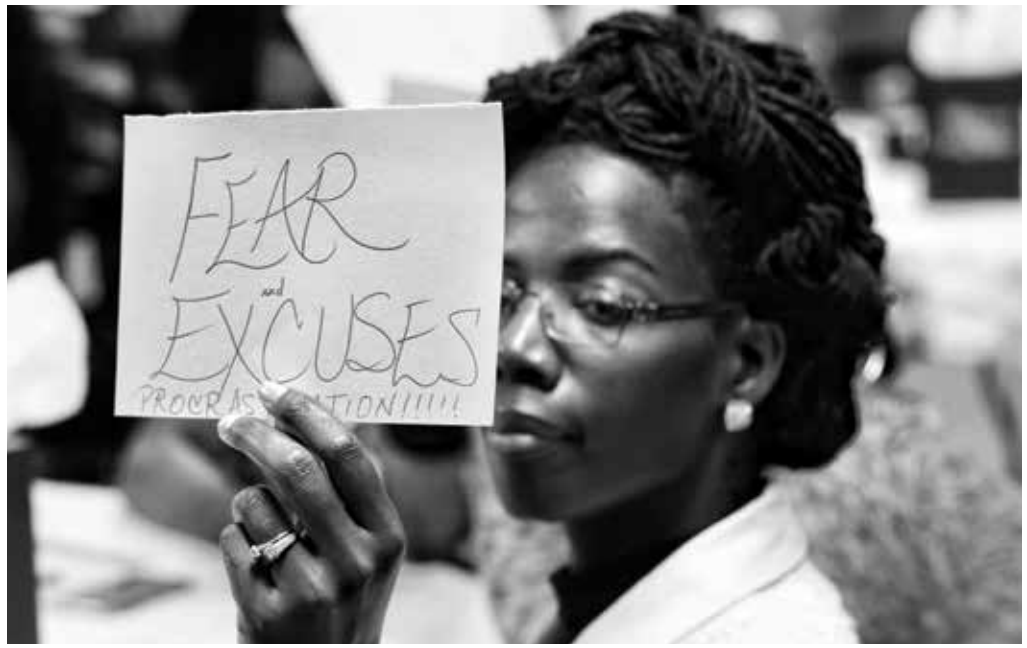
When they can embrace the asset framing mindset, they can take off the mask. They don't have to be anyone other than who they are, or who they thought they couldn't be because of how they grew up.

Pivotal moments can shift the social equity needle

Every Fellow I spoke with could identify that pivotal moment that set them on their way—when someone saw their value or helped focus them toward different goals. For some, that meant a shift from reliving cycles of violence or poverty to owning a different narrative for their life. Each Fellow wanted to reciprocate that pivotal moment for someone else.

Shorters' early vision was that organizations don't reward grassroots-level change adequately, namely because it can be tough to measure. Yet to achieve real gains in social equity, we need to enable more of these pivotal moments and the positive ripple effects they create. He saw proof of this in communities everywhere—leaders with a calling, all of whom had grown up in tough circumstances and had been deeply influenced by their own pivotal moment. What if a fellowship could scale the reach of these leaders in their community? Couldn't it also scale the pivotal moments these



leaders could catalyze? One leader helps 50, those 50 help 50 more, and so on.

Before working with BMe, I thought I understood the primary motivation for prospective Fellows to apply. I believed people wished to elevate themselves and their impact first, rather than their cities, neighborhoods or even other leaders.

But the BMe Fellows concurred with Shorters. BMe is using the fellowship as a springboard for community action and grassroots change. Consistently, Fellows said, "I'm doing this not just for me (my future, my career, my family), but to set a legacy of leadership from the neighborhood up." Fellows are rewriting their own history as a means of helping other young leaders like them to not have to do the same.

Informality and autonomy breed reciprocity

Many fellowships or networks assume that if you don't require contact among Fellows, no community will form. Most fellowships, BMe included, have fund allocation rules and reporting requirements too, all well-intended, of course. But the reality is that too much structure can sometimes inhibit community. It's human nature—rules don't create relationships that last.

BMe is informal by design. While attendance to their events is required, the format is flexible. It's the promise of community reciprocity that keeps the Fellows engaged, not rules or structure. From the beginning, the organization deliberately chose a decentralized, open approach to recruitment. The first cohort of Fellows, for example, proved instrumental in vetting the next cohort, and so on, meaning that many candidates initially encounter the program through informal channels.

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Cross-pollination and collaboration occurs naturally. For instance, Project Pneuma, a Baltimore nonprofit, teaches young African-American men meditation, yoga and exercise. Co-founders Damien Myers and Damion Cooper met as BMe Fellows. Even though they weren't under any obligation to do so, they were inspired to collaborate to provide boys with new skills and pathways into new potential careers. The degree of informality and autonomy built into BMe allows for the free-flowing collaboration that's key to the organization's culture of reciprocity. And by defining its Fellows as vital assets to their communities, BMe has begun to transcend cultural and interpersonal barriers to that collaboration.

A growing cohort of men—and now women—is building a new narrative. BMe Fellows are planting the seeds of social change in the expectation that future generations will live in a better neighborhood, a better city, and a better country. When you're able to see yourself in a new light, an entire world of possibilities is revealed.

Since 2013, Genius Fellows' organizations and initiatives have provided hope and opportunity to over 2-million families. Fellows range from corporate executives and business owners like Evan Frazier and Greg Spencer, who use the network to help forge an executive leadership development program for Black people in Pittsburgh to entrepreneurs like Chris Wilson and Shaka Senghor who were each formerly incarcerated and have become important international influencers in the justice reform movement.

IN PRACTICE

Context Partners has been a design, strategy and implementation partner with the BMe Community since its inception in 2013. Together we've explored how authentic and often informal relationships are changing the narrative of Black men in America.

WHAT WE DID

- Qualitative research
- Service design
- Recruitment campaign design
- Community growth strategy
- Community branding
- Evaluation

OUTCOMES

BMe has grown from 50 Fellows in 3 cities to 234 Fellows in 7 cities, serving over 2 million families.

BRENDAN WARD is a design researcher and strategist with a background in the study of social movements, globalization, and the new cultural forms created therein. At Context Partners, he works to illuminate and uncover the diffuse voices within a particular community.

TRABIAN SHORTERS is a New York Times Bestselling author, social entrepreneur and the leading authority on an award-winning approach to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion called "Asset Framing." His pioneering work in Asset Framing earned him recognition as one of the world's leading social entrepreneurs.