

# MEN OF CHANGE

Taking it to the Streets.



Audio Tour

<http://s.si.edu/MOC>

Transcript of Tour Stops

**Christian Johnson:**

Welcome to *Men of Change: Taking It to The Streets*, a powerful exhibition presented by the Smithsonian's Anacostia Community Museum. My name is Christian Johnson, and I'm a proud Washingtonian, a graduate of Ron Brown College Preparatory High School, and a freshman finance major at the Howard University.

As a young Black man in America, I see more negative images depicted of people who look like me than positive ones, and the ramifications of that can be perilous for Black men and boys. I stand upon the shoulders of my ancestors who have trailblazed the path for excellence for me to walk in with limitless potential, despite of all the hurdles I may face.

The baton has been passed down to me and my generation to continue to change the narrative as we envision a future where our full humanity is seen before our complexions. When we tell our stories from our own perspective and share them with the world, it creates possibilities for us to authentically connect with people from all walks of life at a deeper level, and it helps us better understand the common bonds of our shared humanity.

Men of Change does just that by providing a valuable platform for revolutionary, powerful, loving,

brilliant, and creative Black men to share their stories. The exhibit features inspirational stories of 24 historic and contemporary men of change and is curated under seven themes: storytellers, myth breakers, fathering, community, imagining, catalyst, and loving.

The exhibit is about the truth of who we really are. There are countless men of change right here in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area who embody the truths illuminated in this exhibit, and they are making a positive impact in their community every single day. Some are well-known, others not so much.

Join me for a walking tour of the *Men of Change* exhibit at the Deanwood Community Center and Ron Brown High School. Throughout the tour, you will hear from students as they share their personal accounts of which men of change resonate with them. Make sure you use the #MenOfChangeDC hashtag and Instagram filter to share your stories on social media.

## **Stop 1: Myth-Breakers**

### **Christian Johnson:**

Stop one: Myth-Breakers. You're standing here at the entrance of Ron Brown College Preparatory High School, my alma mater. When the Anacostia Community Museum was looking for an outdoor site for Men of Change, it was our school that drew them here to Deanwood. Of the seven themes in the exhibition, they chose to install Myth-Breakers here. This is not an accident. Listen to one of Ron Brown's students, Paris Lewis, talk about the culture of the school and how it encourages myth breaking.

### **Paris Lewis:**

I think myself and students at Ron Brown are myth breakers in several ways. We are the first and only Black and Latino, all-male, public high school in the history of the city. We have a very high graduation rate of over 75%, with most of the students who graduated going to college or having other various, successful post-high school plans. In my opinion, we have a JRTC program in this city, by winning multiple championships in and outside of the DMV against schools who compete on a national level on a yearly basis. We have things like restorative justice, which break the whole myth of the school to prison pipeline because, the way it works is, we solve the issue, then and there, when it happens, so that it doesn't linger, and it doesn't disrupt the flow of the classroom. It just defies the narrative as Black men, we are inferior, or we can't do great in the classroom.

### **Christian Johnson:**

Now, find the back of this triangular display. You should see a photo of myth breaker Kendrick Lamar with his head tilted back and his eyes closed. Like all men in this section, Lamar knows how to spit the truth. On a panel at the top, there's an excerpt from his song Fear. The lyrics in this rhyme are both vulnerable and brave at the same time. He doesn't fit nicely into society's idea of a hip hop star.

Listen:

“At 27 years old, my biggest fear was being judged. How they look at me, reflect on myself, my family, my city. What they say about me, reveal if my reputation would miss me. What they see from me will trickle down generations in time. What they hear from me will make them highlight my simplest lines.”

Now, here's Paris Lewis again, talking about another Kendrick Lamar song.

**Paris Lewis:**

I would say my favorite song by Kendrick is "DNA" from his Grammy and Pulitzer prize-winning album, *DAMN*. We learn in science class that you get half of your DNA from your mother and the other half from your father. That DNA is the physical blueprint of a person from births. I believe that our DNA is the story of our ancestors passed down to make us who we are today. In DNA, Kendrick tells the world the truth about Black men in the song and breaks the myth that we are not valuable. I believe that the truth is we hold the DNA of kings in our bodies. We have loyalty and royalty inside of our DNA, which he actually says in the song. You can just take a look at all the kings around you: kings like Mansa Musa, Martin Luther King, or even King James, just to show the greatness of the Black man. We are the young kings at Ron Brown that are just like these men and are constantly just bettering themselves and growing up to be great men. I believe that we are truly special, and we will change the world.

**Christian Johnson:**

If you're ready, let's walk to the next stop on the tour. Number two: Imagining. Facing the street, take a right and head around the block. At the tennis court, turn right.

What did the Myth Breaker section remind you of in your own life? Have you ever felt like a story was being written for you, that people make assumptions about who you are? If it's one thing those guys are telling us, it's to live our truth, to simply do you.

**Stop 2: Imagining**

**Azael Banyan:**

Imagination, to me, is power. It's related to love. It's practically the cousin of love. It could make things. It's the builder. It's a construction worker. It can make art. It can make food. It can make maps. It can make presidents too.

**Christian Johnson:**

That was one of our own Deanwood kids. Azeal Banyan, thanks little man. Stop two: Imagining. As you stand in front of this display, stop and let your eyes take in all of these icons. It's undeniable that mainstream American culture is heavily influenced by Black imagination. These men have invented and reinvented everything from art and style to performance and even the future itself.

On the left side of the display, you'll see a portrait of the one and only Sun Ra. He's the far-out looking dude in a winged headdress. He was born with the name Herman Poole Blount, but he changed it to Sun Ra, after the Egyptian god, and began his career as a jazz musician and pioneer for what we now call Afro-futurism. The way he expressed himself through jazz and science fiction allowed Sun Ra to detach himself from earthly definitions, such as race and identity. If you want a glimpse into Sun Ra's imagination, check out the movie *Space is the Place* from 1974. It's definitely a trip.

In this clip, teenager and Deanwood resident, David Smith Jr., talks about what performance and art means to him.

**David Smith Jr.:**

I grew up around art. You had a program called the Pearl Coalition, where kids would come in, and they would paint, and we would play drums. We would just talk about history, and Black history, and about the community's history. It was a really eye-opening experience because I saw all these kids coming together and expressing themselves in a whole bunch of different forms. I grew up on the foundation of art, not being some singular, but something that people can use to express who they are, whether that be painting, dancing, singing, playing a sport, gaming, anything like that. I went to Duke Ellington School of the Arts because I grew up singing. That's what my sisters did. I really wanted to sing it. That's how I express myself. That's one of the ways that I express myself. When I see art, it's a big influence in my life because when you think of our people and our community, you think of art. I grew up around art, and that just really influenced all my choices in life.

**Christian Johnson:**

With creativity comes possibility. Check out the quote at the top of the display. The first line reads, "We will not know our own injustice if we cannot imagine justice." Let's stop right here, right here on this spot, and imagine justice.

When you're ready, walk a few steps more to the next display.

**Stop 3: Catalysts****Christian Johnson:**

Stop three: Catalyst, the spark, the alpha, the OG. He who ignites the fire can bring his light to everyone. The men in this display saw a need for change and did not wait for someone else to carry the heavy load. As the quote in front of you says, "There is no cavalry coming to save the day."

This is exactly what led Muhammad Ali to refuse the induction into the military after being drafted for the Vietnam War. He was only 25 years when he took a stance that could have ruined his boxing career. With the tone of defiance, he said, "No, I'm not going 10,000 miles from home to murder and burn another poor nation simply to continue the domination of white slave masters of the darker people in the world."

Ali had just joined the Nation of Islam and explained how his faith was a part of his decision. "I either have to obey the laws of the land or the laws of Allah. I have nothing to lose by standing up for my beliefs, so I'll go to jail. We've been in jail for 400 years."

Most people today think of Ali as a hero. But in 1969, he was not supported by many. He was stripped of his boxing titles and called unpatriotic by the American people, both Black and white.

On the label next to the Cleveland Summit photo, you can read about how Ali convinced a group of African-American athletes to support him and to risk their careers in the process. Of all of the men in Men of Change, Ron Brown High School student, Mekhi Turner, said Muhammad Ali inspired him the most. But why? Here's Mekhi and his teacher, Travis Bouldin.

**Mekhi Turner:**

Most definitely, the champ of the world, but also how he impacted the civil rights movement. He was also able to use his voice while using his hands to demonstrate the power of an African-American man.

**Travis Bouldin:**

I like when you said the way he used his voice while also using his hands. Tell us more about that.

**Mekhi Turner:**

Through his journey, a lot of people's always that he was a boxer. Even before he converted to Islam, he was always using his voice. He was always sharing his belief system to people, answering their questions, but he was always in the communities.

**Christian Johnson:**

Being a catalyst means being willing to risk the things that make you comfortable. Ali uses leverage as a popular athlete to take a stand, but we all have a voice. How many people walk down this path every day on their way to Metro or to school? Imagine the power to catalyze change that exists right here on this pavement each day.

When you're ready, take a few more steps down the path to the Fathering section.

**Stop 4: Fathering****Christian Johnson:**

Stop four: Fathering. Fathers, uncles, teachers, coaches, every great African-American man stands on the shoulders of elders. These mentors provide an ecosystem of support and wisdom. This two-block area in Deanwood is like a big web of encouragement. The rec center, the library, Ron Brown High School, all here to uplift, inspire and nourish the community. There are father figures right here making a difference every day. Listen to Ron Brown High School student, Ean Bowie, talk about someone who means a lot to him.

**David Smith Sr.:**

The story that comes to mind when I think about fathering is when my stepfather took care of us when our mom died five years ago. He added three more people to his last day he had to worry about. Without him, I wouldn't be who I am today. He just pushed me in many ways that I couldn't have pushed myself.

**Christian Johnson:**

The display in front of you illustrates the essence of fatherhood in many different ways. Some traditional and heartwarming: the father holding his new baby, a dad, and his son at the beach. Then, there's the photo of Robert Smith. You may not know his name, but you're looking at the richest Black man in America. As one of only eight Black billionaires in the country. Young men can't help but to admire his smarts and his hustle. The struggle for the Black dollar in America is real. But Robert Smith is known just as much for the money he gives away as for the money he earns. In 2019, he paid off the student loans for the entire graduating class of Morehouse College: a total of \$34 million. Smith has never forgotten the paths that were paved for him. He is on a mission to put the next generation of Black men on solid

footing. The way he takes care of those that come behind him is this fatherhood superpower. What's your fatherhood superpower?

Take a few more steps down the path to a big Black text panel with the words "Loving."

## **Stop 5: Loving**

### **Christian Johnson:**

Stop five: Loving. The theme of Loving was meant as an overarching theme that creates a frame for the entire Men of Change exhibit. There's not a specific group of men associated with this theme, but there's a feeling.

This is a quote written by Isaac Perry, the eloquent author of all the text and his exhibition. Listen:

"Loving. The longevity of strength depends upon the strength of love. Resistance is done out of love. Perseverance is made possible by love. Revolution, dedication, survival, success are all products of profound love. These men of change are in love. They are in love with Black people and the Black identity in America. From their well of love, they draw power. They use it to shoulder the weight of the present and the ambition of the future. They resist, persevere, and revolutionize. They prove that the great source of their strength is the strength of their love."

### **Azael Banyan:**

This poem makes me feel like love has strong power. It can help people. It can heal people. It's like a weapon. It's like a community. It can do many things.

### **Christian Johnson:**

From here, when you arrive at the sidewalk, take a left. Walk up the block, past the parking lot to the Deanwood Library entrance. While you walk and process your thoughts, enjoy these locally mixed beats by Ron Brown High School teacher, Mr. Lawrence Jackson. This track is called Peony Buds. To hear more of Mr. Lawrence Jackson, Google the words "vintage vandalism" and "Lawrence Jackson."

## **Stop 6: Storytelling**

Stop six: Storytelling. Here, we are at Deanwood Public Library: the perfect place to celebrate the Black men who have boldly disrupted the mainstream narrative. We own our stories by telling our stories. Dick Gregory told it to America straight. His stealth weapon was humor. He showed that comedy doesn't have to sugarcoat the truth. When Willie Mays experienced racism in major league baseball, Gregory talked about it in his show, at a time when Black comedians wouldn't dare bring up the subject to white audiences.

"Baseball," he said to an all-white crowd. "Now, that's a great sport for my people. That's the only sport where a negro can shake a stick at a white man, and it won't start no riot." But he was so much more than a comedian. Listen to Ron Brown High School student, Mekhi Turner, speaking with his teacher, Travis Bouldin, about the impact of Gregory's life.

**Mekhi Turner:**

A lot of people, if we're just talking about people who held a position in the civil rights movement, say Malcolm X or Martin Luther King Jr, their ways of communication was usually public speaking, or they would come into communities. They would talk about an issue that needs to be resolved. But with Dick Gregory, he used platform. He used his image as a comedian to [inaudible 00:19:48] people to understand what is going on, or just an idea of correcting, and the society, and just everything that is happening while also using comedy how he used it. Yeah. Most def.

**Travis Bouldin:**

Beyond comedy, there was a number of things upheld and stood on, including several hunger strikes and protests when it came to even international issues. It wasn't just African Americans here. What are your thoughts about someone who has the capacity to not only fight for human rights at home but to also fight for human rights abroad?

**Mekhi Turner:**

That's extremely important. It brings up the words of "yes, I can." During this time period, you wouldn't see a lot of African-Americans running for political positions. Just him showing that to the people who might not believe their voice means anything, I think he just showed them that, yes, it does.

**Christian Johnson:**

When you're ready, we're going to head off to our next stop: Community. Keeping following the sidewalk down this road until you get to the paved alleyway. Take a left there, and keep following the building around to the playground. It's about a three-minute walk. See you there.

**Stop 7: Community**

**Christian Johnson:**

Stop seven: Community. When the Anacostia Community Museum scouted locations for Men of Change, it seemed almost too good to be true that these two blocks would match so closely with the themes and values of the exhibition. Here we are at the community section, at the front steps of the community center.

The Deanwood Recreation Center brings people together and supports their growth. They have a swimming pool, cooking classes, meeting rooms, a playground. There's a lot. They even kept the doors open during the pandemic so that kids without computers at home could do their homework. They even handed out free meals to those in need. Building Community is a hallmark of Black culture. The men featured here have maintained unbroken connections to the places that formed them and the people that raised them, men like the brilliant Charles Hamilton Houston born right here, in D.C.

Find a photo of Houston. He's the gentlemen with a suit with a deadly serious look on his face. It's a look that fits because Charles Houston was known as the man who killed Jim Crow. Houston dedicated his life to ending segregation, especially in schools. As a lawyer and an early civil rights strategist, it was his idea to show the courts that separate is never really equal. But he knew he could not fight the fight alone. He came back to this community and began training an army of civil rights lawyers at Howard University of Law. He was a mighty ripple in a pond that eventually would turn into a giant wave. Only about five blocks from where you're standing is Charles Hamilton Houston elementary school.

Listen to community member David Smith talk about what the name Charles Houston means to the Deanwood community.

**David Smith Sr.:**

Charles Houston is a perfect example of the type of rebels that surrounded our neighborhood, like the Nannie Helen Burroughs and the H.D. Woodsons and the Tuskegee airman families, et cetera. Charles Woodson [*sic Houston*] started the credited School of Law at Howard University. When Houston Elementary School was a school across the street from my house, we named a school after him as a community because we wanted our community to embody his core belief of cooperative ownership and opportunity specifically for the Native American and the African-American, which are really wanting the same from a historical context of how we went about getting rights.

**David Smith Sr.:**

Nannie Helen Burrough said, "If you want to control and change the future, then control and change the mind of a child." Charles Houston said that America is consistently preoccupied, basically... And I'm paraphrasing. We're helping every other class of people, but the people who are descendants of slavery. Everything that we see legally today, all the cases that people have won civil rights cases on, are based on Charles Houston. Charles Houston had a keen focus on making sure that his people, the people who built this nation, were represented in every aspect from government contract and education to media and to economic progress.

**Christian Johnson:**

One thing all of these men have in common is that they believe that change starts at home, wherever that is, and that the people, their bonds, their ability to support one another is one of the most important things we all can have. What community do you care about? Who are your people? Take a second and think about what you can do to give a little bit more back to the place that raised you.

**Stop 8: Deanwood Men of Change**

Stop eight: Deanwood Men of Change. Deanwood is one of the oldest African-American neighborhoods in Washington, D.C.. The community was built on the land of a former slaveholder. But it's been a place where Black people have found economic freedom in owning homes and businesses. Long-time resident David Smith Sr. explains how the history of the neighborhood contributes to his culture today, including the tough times.

**David Smith Jr.:**

What do you want other people to know about the meaning of Deanwood community?

**David Smith Sr.:**

When people come to Deanwood, I want them to see the reality of what we built as a people. All the institutional buildings that you see, the land that they're on were largely donated or given or developed by my ancestors or the ancestors that came before me, Black people, and other immigrant groups that lived in this community. We had to donate land and build this community because many of the red line, and Jim Crow, you know, racist practices existed economically.



Deanwood just had a rich history of people who were committed to a cooperative, inclusive, diverse way of life that was solely based around a deep-rooted sense of faith, ownership, and self-pride, and determination.

My grandfather Lloyd Smith started Marshall Heights Community Development Organization. They cooperatively pulled a trust together and bought \$52 million worth of land and changed the economic status of Ward Seven and stabilized it.

Deanwood would have a legacy of advocacy and balance. It's not just about money. We built our culture around H.D. Woodson, Nannie Helen Burrough, Charles Houston, Roper, Lloyd Smith, really cool people who lived here, worked here.

Community, arts, economic development, and ownership has always been an integral part of not just the culture but our family network here in Deanwood. When you see Deanwood, see us as a people who've always worked together and advocated for everything we got. It was a struggle and difficult, but I still love it now.

**Christian Johnson:**

For the occasion of this exhibition, a group of Deanwood residents got together and nominated their own Men of Change for each theme. (pause) "The process really reminded us of who we are" said organizer David Smith.

You don't have to be famous to be a Man of Change - or even a person of change. Everyone has the power, in some small way, to push us all forward.

Thanks for taking a stroll with me today. My name's Christian Johnson. I'm a freshman finance major at Howard University, a proud alumni of Ron Brown College Preparatory High School, and future man of change.

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The presentation of *Men of Change: Taking it to the Streets* is organized by the Smithsonian's Anacostia Community Museum and the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES). It's based on the SITES traveling exhibition *Men of Change: Power: Triumph. Truth.* which was made possible through the generous support of the Ford Motor Company Fund and Community Services.

*Men of Change: Taking it to the Streets* is supported by the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities and the Smithsonian Women's Committee. Media sponsorship is provided by the Washington Informer Newspaper.



Map of Tour Stops

