

## Meeting The Moment

An Interview with Khary Lazarre-White, Executive Director and Co-Founder, The Brotherhood Sister Sol

**EDITORS' NOTE** Born and raised in New York City, Khary Lazarre-White is a social entrepreneur, novelist, educator, activist, and civil rights lawyer whose work centers on the intersection of race, class, gender, education, organizing, and the law. In 1995, at the age of 21, Lazarre-White co-founded The Brotherhood Sister Sol (BroSis), a now nationally renowned, Harlem based, comprehensive social justice youth development and educational organization that works on



Khary Lazarre-White

issues of education, organizing and training the field to advance justice. The organization provides direct service and political education to young people, trains educators across the nation on its model, and organizes to advance social change. Over the last 27 years, Lazarre-White has been recognized for his leadership in providing some of the most innovative and highly successful practices in the nation. His awards include the Oprah Winfrey's Angel Network Use Your Life Award, as well as from institutions that include Ford Foundation, Black Girls Rock, Andrew Goodman Foundation, Union Square Awards, Brown University, National Recreation Foundation's Robert W. Crawford Achievement Prize, African American Literature Awards, National Guild for Community Arts Education, the national NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund/Shearman & Sterling Law Scholarship Award that supported his legal studies, and a Resident Fellowship Award to the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center. Lazarre-White has extensive experience as a speaker across the country and has been featured widely on national media sites as well. He has edited three publications of BroSis and contributed assorted curriculum workshops and pedagogical writings to these collections. He has written opinion pieces and essays for publications that include the Huffington Post, Nation Books, Essence Magazine, MSNBC, and New York University Press. In September 2017, Seven Stories Press published his first novel, *Passage*, which is distributed by Penguin Random House. Reviewed widely, and named among "Best New Fiction" by The Wall Street Journal, the paperback edition was released in January 2019. Lazarre-White serves on the Board of Trustees for the Community Service Society and also serves on the Dean's Advisory Council for the

CUNY School for Public Health. He is a member of the Bar in the States of New Jersey and New York. Lazarre-White received his BA degree in Africana Studies, with honors, from Brown University, and his Juris Doctorate from Yale Law School where his focus was international human rights law and constitutional law.

**ORGANIZATION BRIEF** For more than 25 years, The Brotherhood Sister Sol (BroSis) has been at the forefront of social justice, educating, organizing and training to challenge inequity and champion opportunity for all. With a focus on Black and Latinx youth, BroSis (brotherhood-sistersol.org) is where young people claim the power of their history, identity, and community to build the future they want to see. Through unconditional love, around-the-clock support, and wraparound programming, BroSis makes space for Black and Latinx young people to examine their roots, define their stories, and awaken their agency. Through the organizations comprehensive educational programs, it is helping young people develop a critical understanding of their history, identity, and role in society. Together with its members, alumni, and partners, BroSis is building on a legacy of youth-led activism to realize a more just and equitable future. Through its innovative training models, BroSis is empowering educators and organizers to spark young agents of change across the nation. Founded and headquartered in Harlem, BroSis offers far-reaching opportunities for young people across the country to transform their lives and communities.

### What was your vision for creating The Brotherhood Sister Sol?

Our vision was to create a space where all young people feel supported, guided and able to be themselves and be free to explore and discover. All children need such spaces in their lives. Ours is a formed community based on our themes of positivity, knowledge, community and future. We seek to create a community for young people that each and every day centers them and that tells them that they matter – that holds them. We work to educate young people so that they develop a life-long love of learning, so that they come to understand the conditions they face and were born

into, and so that they become social change-makers working for a better and more inclusive world. All children deserve access and opportunity.

### How do you define The Brotherhood Sister Sol's mission and purpose?

The Brotherhood Sister Sol is an organization founded and developed to meet the moment that we are in as a city and as a nation. Our vision is a big, grand vision – the kind of expansive thinking and intersectional approach that is needed. This vision derives from almost 30 years of being unafraid to struggle with the complicated issues of our time that are interwoven with the pervasive inequalities that are as old as this nation. This vision is based on almost 30 years of seeking solutions. The reason our work is so comprehensive and multi-faceted is due to the issues our youth face being so comprehensive and multi-faceted. One out of three residents in New York City live below or near the federal poverty line and one in four children live in deep economic poverty without access to basic necessities. In the community we serve, nearly one in five families have an income below \$10,000. Just one in three New York City



Unforgettable day at Yankee Stadium with Aaron Judge and Anthony Rizzo who spent time playing catch and sharing their stories and wisdom



*BroSis summer day camp – seven weeks of growth, nurturing, and fun*

public school students graduate college ready without the need of remedial support to attend a community college. We provide comprehensive support, guidance, education, and love to young people to counter all of these realities. The range and diversity and depth of our services is unique. The focus on organizing and change work is unyielding.

**Will you discuss The Brotherhood Sister Sol’s “Theory of Change” and provide an overview of this transformative youth development model?**

Our “Theory of Change” is to provide multi-layered support, guidance, education, and love to our membership; to teach them to have self-discipline and form order in their lives; and to then offer opportunities and access so they may develop agency. It is so vital that youth feel supported, guided, and loved. It is also essential that they learn self-discipline and consistency. In the end, a young person who has agency is one who will be able to advocate for themselves and handle our difficult and complicated world.

And opportunities? Opportunities are the pathways to successful lives. We help young people claim the power of their history, identity, and community to build the future they want to see. Through unconditional love, around-the-clock support, and wraparound programming, we make space for Black and Latinx young people to examine their roots, define their stories, and awaken their agency. They learn to develop a critical understanding of their history, identity, and role in society. We build on a legacy of youth-led activism to realize a more just and equitable future. Through our innovative training models, we’re empowering educators and organizers to spark young agents of change across the nation and world. We are currently partnering with groups

in Boston; Washington DC; San Francisco; Lisbon, Portugal; and Salvador de Bahia, Brazil to implement our model.

**Will you provide an overview of The Brotherhood Sister Sol’s programs?**

For nearly 30 years, we have been at the forefront of social justice, educating, organizing, and training to challenge inequity and champion opportunity for all. We are helping youth develop their minds, bodies, and spirits in a healthy manner, ensuring their development into strong and stable adults. We help young people to break cycles of poverty, to develop agency, to become changemakers. BroSis is a formed community – one that helps youth to define an ethical and moral code, and to live up to these ideals. In a time of deep disconnection, we seek to establish connection. Our approach is based on ideals of humanity and interconnectedness that are as old as time. We are a part of the long legacy of freedom movements in this country – the legacy of efforts to work tirelessly to make this city, this nation, more just, more equitable. The U.S. Surgeon General, Vivek H. Murthy, recently called the youth mental health crisis “the defining public health issue of our time,” saying that it threatens “the foundation for health and well-being for millions of our children.” This is, in part, why we focus so much on wellness and mental health. Last year, Nicholas Kristoff wrote in *The New York Times*: “Loneliness crushes the soul, but researchers are finding it does far more damage than that. It is linked to strokes, heart disease, dementia, inflammation, and suicide; it breaks the heart literally as well as figuratively.” Loneliness is as deadly as smoking 15 cigarettes a day and more lethal than consuming six alcoholic drinks a day, according to the surgeon general of the United States, Dr. Vivek Murthy. “Loneliness is more dangerous for health than obesity,” he says – and, alas, “we have been growing more lonely.” And so, we at BroSis build connection and community. For youth, we offer four-to-six-year rites of passage programming, after school care, counseling, summer camp, job training, college preparation, employment opportunities, activist training, community gardening, mental health support, intensive arts programming, and international study programs to Africa, South America, and the Caribbean. For our recent alumni members, we provide support to ensure they remain in college or employed and they continue to make healthy and productive choices in their lives.

**How crucial are metrics to measure the impact of The Brotherhood Sister Sol’s work?**

Metrics are essential at BroSis. We look to the metrics of inequity that our young people face – and we respond. We, as a society, allow 10 percent of the children in New York City public schools to be homeless. Nearly 100,000 children – each and every day – are without a home. There are many framings that seek to explain inequality. What are the necessary interventions? The wealthiest fifth of Manhattanites earned an average household income of \$545,549, or more than 53 times as much as the

bottom 20 percent, who earned an average of \$10,259, according to 2022 census data. Nearly 20 percent of public housing residents in New York City reported making less than \$10,000. In response to these realities, 95 percent of BroSis alum have graduated from high school and 95 percent of BroSis alum, ages 18-25, are in college or working full time. We have no alum incarcerated and have greatly reduced the rate of teenage pregnancy. We are ensuring they have the foundation and time to build long-term stable lives.

**What do you feel are the keys to effective leadership and how do you approach your management style?**

In my role, I have to ensure that I meet a high level of achievement in the non-negotiable areas of management – mission alignment and the highest standards of excellence and expectation. I approach management through a focus on an unwavering commitment to mission; to practice consistent, and when necessary, inspirational leadership for staff; to guide and also inspire our Board of Directors as these volunteer agents of BroSis are so important to advancing our mission; to lead the efforts to raise funding and resources to advance, and to be a strong spokesperson, for our specific programming, but also the larger societal issues with which we are engaged. I believe in hiring strong leaders with deep subject matter expertise. I seek to listen to others when we are facing crucial decisions and ask for their input and to know when it is essential to form consensus – but to also know when the time calls for efficient and quick executive decision-making. I think it is crucially important to invest in staff with regards to professional development and coaching and external opportunities. It is also so vitally important to lead in a mission-aligned manner, and so, as a social justice focused organization, how do we take care of our staff? We ensure competitive salaries that allow for a professional long-tenured staff; we provide extensive benefits that allow for high-quality healthcare for staff and their families; we provide robust time off from work so staff can restore and live full lives; we seek to treat staff in the same way we all seek to support our young people. We want to live our mission – mission alignment in all that we do here. Mission is the word that guides my management and leadership.

**What led you to nonprofit work and has made the work so special for you?**

I feel my work is a calling. It doesn’t feel like “nonprofit work,” but instead part of the legacy of working to ensure America becomes the nation of its stated ideals, its aspirations. My parents were involved in the Civil Rights Movement, the Women’s Movement, the Anti-Vietnam War Movement, the Labor Movement. I come from a deeply engaged family, one that is unafraid to struggle with the complicated issues of our time, and to work, even if sometimes frustratingly slowly, towards a better world. It isn’t a platitude or a fallacy – but it is the necessary and most essential work to be done. To know that we are participating in that effort here at BroSis inspires me each day. ●