

The Listen Up Project presents:

BLACK VOICES *of Vermont*



Featuring:



Yeshua Armbrister

What's it like to be a teenager in Vermont right now? How does your racial identity impact your experience?

Yeshua: My experience has been positively affected by my racial identity in the sense that I am blessed with a double perspective. I am a being that was raised within a white family. I also travelled to The Bahamas to experience the other half of my inherent culture. I am able to relate to the yin as well as the yang, so to speak, and I can appreciate the access to many more communicational tools because of this gift. Being within the demographic of my age now means a crazy show: I observe many people my age who passionately voice their young opinions and ideologies, posting them on social media in the forms of entertainment and criticism.

What does centering and celebrating Blackness mean to you?

Yeshua: It seems that black history month is an "It's the thought that counts" sort of situation. In my few years of life in the USA I have lacked the experience of learning anything new about successful black leaders, inventors, entrepreneurs, writers, artists, etc. In my experience, there has been a repeat of certain aspects of the lives of Martin Luther King Jr., (perhaps a quote from his renowned Dream speech) Rosa Parks' bus story, and maybe hearing a few remarks about Malcolm X.

To me, deeming the shortest month a time to recall black history and proceeding to ignore the most crucial aspects that contribute to the essence of being an African descendant is but a first level attempt of celebrating Black history. Fortunately, with The Listen Up Project we are able to go beyond the boundary of 28 days and recognize the presence of all ethnicities in Vermont with much pride and exuberance with each and every performance, workshop and interview.

Who are your role models? From whom do you draw strength?

Yeshua: I now fix my gaze upon the strong leaders of my family. These include my father, my brother, my mother, and my grandfather. I also draw strength in the knowledge that whatever happens is meant to be; otherwise it would not happen. I draw influence from my father because I see him as a very wise and spiritually attuned individual. He has revealed to me what it means to be a man and has guided me to many important influential teachers through the very books that he has read over the years. I draw influence from my brother because he shows me true self sacrifice. This is not in the sense that he puts others above himself, but rather he places the highest good of all involved in utmost importance. I draw influence from my mother because I see that she is steadfast and does not give up. She has been a single mother with a minimum of 2 kids (at a time) for years and now houses 5 of us; all while filling out a ton of paperwork, keeping high hopes and vibes, always providing more than ample treatment and comfort to the family. I draw influence from my grandfather because he is constantly and consistently active. This has a remarkable affect on his health. He keeps going until he hits the reserve tank! Then, he *might* slow down. I admire all of these traits shown by my family and I hope to replicate the best aspects of their examples in my own life.

What can the state of Vermont do to actively support young Black Vermonters?

Yeshua: The state of Vermont can create and support social groups in which people can congregate and contemplate questions such as this... the question is will the state do this? The deep roots of systematic and cultural bias extend for generations, and the quicker we start digging at this poisonous tree, the quicker we can root it out for the sake of future generations all over the world.

An appropriate place to start is The Listen Up Project, where there are workshops and musical pieces, along with a particular section of the script, that let the minorities of this state (and beyond) voice their individual / collective experiences with being a person born of a people that do not genetically stem from previously colonial nations. There can be a very positive impact, in the lives of everyone involved, to be able to exercise the right of free speech and congregation, especially while addressing perhaps the most important underexplored subject matter of the past 400+ years.

Share a story about your life that feels important, or that has made you who you are?

Yeshua: At the age of 7, my parents brought me to The Bahamas. This experience propelled me into another world which was full of new and exciting ways of living. I lived there for eight years or so, and returned to the USA for sophomore year of high school. While in The Bahamas, I was to lead a completely new life, speak a new dialect and grow to become acquainted with island life and hospitality.

My family owns a shop on the most popular public beach in Nassau, Bahamas: Junkanoo Beach. Over the years I'd greet customers as they arrived, offering accommodations such as lounging, food, drinks, snorkels, towels etc. This granted me great exposure to people from literally all over the world and even served as inspiration for me to learn Spanish.

Long story short, I believe this trip had an enormous effect on the person that I still grow to become. I was able to transition from an all white state to an all black island in a matter of months and somehow adapted pretty quickly to the new lifestyle. I am grateful for the people I've met on the beach and upon my return as a boarding student to St. Johnsbury Academy. I was able to befriend about a dozen people from 8 different countries in that school and we got along fantastically as a group. Without my adventure to the Bahamas I doubt that would have ever been the case. Thus, my experience of living in The USA as well as The Bahamas may be the most important event(s) in my life thus far.