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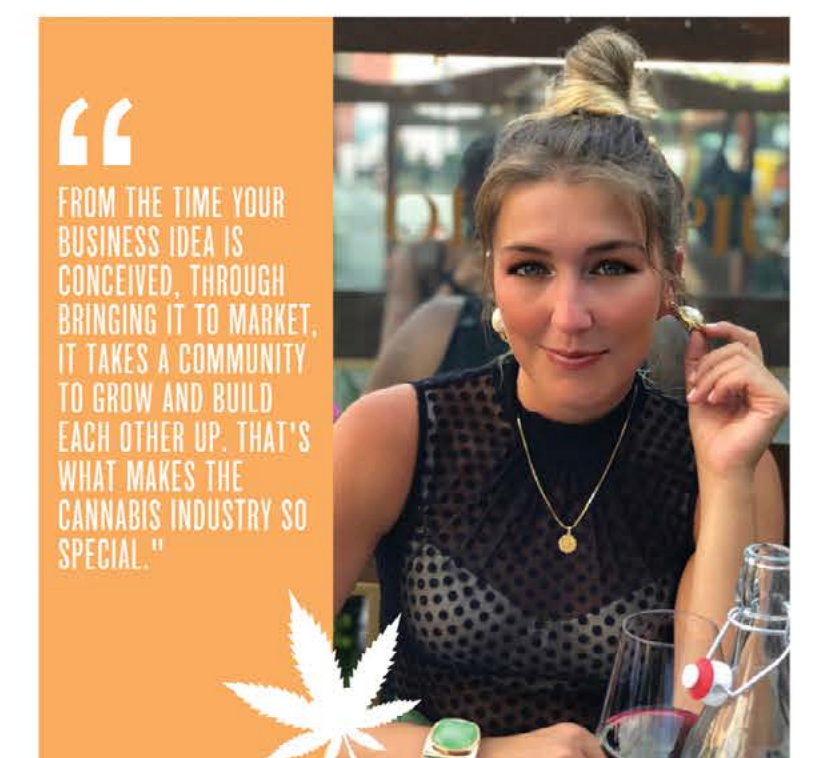
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POWER OF THE PEOPLE

When I came down with COVID-19 in March 2020, I could never have imagined that would only be the beginning to the changes that lay ahead.

From business pivots, to conspiracy theorists, to social injustice — life has yet to return to a state of “normal.”

But what is normal? Is it repetitive routines? Tranquil evenings? Undisturbed serenity? Perhaps. But for marginalized lives, there is nothing normal about going back. As social unrest fills our streets: activists, leaders, organizers and even publishers, have yet to return to any type of normality.

It is with great pride and unwavering responsibility that *Emerald* takes the industry’s lead reporting on social and systemic inequality. Today we know there are still 40,000 inmates incarcerated for cannabis-related charges. A Black Indigenous Person of Color (BIPoC) is over three and a half times more likely to be arrested for cannabis in comparison to a caucasian. And while I may have been on the other side of that statistic as a white person who was jailed for cannabis, during my experience of civil injustice, something snapped. A fire inside ignited eight years ago, and the flame has yet to go out.

From the police raiding my home and detaining me for hours without a warrant, to the sexual harassment I received from law enforcement while in jail, to the “pay-to-play” cash-bail system — I was disgusted, distributed, and activated to fight.

Media is at the forefront of change. Now more than ever, communication is critical. As a media group, it is our responsibility to deliver unbiased, substantiated reports. We do not take this responsibility lightly. *Emerald* is proud to support Black Lives Matter, LGBTQQAAP+, and women’s movements. We stand in solidarity with protesters, and all who suffer from, and fight against systemic racism, oppression, inequality and police brutality. *Emerald* is proud to work with a diverse staff who is brought together by the common mission of ending the War on Drugs equitably. We have, and will continue to use our platform to amplify the disenfranchised.

Through these pages, follow the lives of four People who are using their platforms enduringly.

Hip-hop artist and Top 16 contestant on Netflix’s *Rhythm and Flow*, Felisha George, dedicates her life, love and music to the healing of our souls. From a young age, George transformed her emotions into the art form of rap. Her latest single, *Wash Your Soul*, takes listeners on a journey of learning, growing and healing. “I want to actually rap what I’m feeling, what I’m experiencing, what I see on a day-to-day basis,” George told *The Emerald Magazine*. Her performances touch on adversity, and inspire others to have the courage to walk with their heads held high.

Speaking of head held high, Laganja Estranja struts her mission on the scene with heels so tall her head would hit the clouds. Using her platform as a microphone for equality, this Drag Queen remains stoned on the throne as she slays the stage for LGBTQQAAP+ rights, using her choreography and performances to expand the voices of those who suffer from discrimination and societal bias.

Cannabis and racism has a deeply rooted and intertwined history. Used as a propaganda tool, Commissioner of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, Harry Anslinger believed cannabis made people (predominantly BIPoC) view themselves as equal to white elites. To him, this was unacceptable, and certainly unheard of for the time. Now, 45 years after his death, BIPoC continue the fight for equality, both socially and systemically.

Nupol Kiazolu, President of Black Lives Matter of Greater New York has fought for equal rights since she was nearly-suspended from her middle school for it at 12 years old. Her journey started long ago, with the White House becoming her end in sight. She spoke with *Emerald* about the dangers of protesting, and of her experience being taken into custody in Kentucky for demanding the arrest of the cops who killed Breonna Taylor. Kiazolu gives us insight into the experience, which included being put in cages, and cuffed to chains like slaves.

As the media continues to cover unrest in our country, this narrative has become all too familiar. Activists like Kiazolu never rest. The plight is hard and the journey is long. But it is through the People that we are able to strengthen the global community.

It is the People who operate the platforms that amplify the voices of the unheard. It is the People who move mountains to get their points across. And it will only be through the People that change is made.

When times get tough, and the political fatigue overcomes us, we often turn to humor for mental escape. Ngaijo Bealum is a life-long activist, comedian and writer who crafts heavy topics with lighthearted tones. But, lately, he’s been filled with rage and hope, he told *Emerald*. “[I’m] trying to let my anger motivate me but not guide me. It fills me with hope because I feel like we can go further faster. We have more people on our side now, who have really looked around.”

Whether it’s through music, dance, protests or comedy, there is one common denominator — the People. The voices of activists are heard through their audience. It is the People that carry the message beyond the page or screen.

As 2020 comes to a close, let us, the People, continue to walk with woke eyes. The power is in our hands, how will you use it?

Sincerely,
Christina E. de Giovanni



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FELISHA GEORGE



Hip-Hop for Healing and Celebration

WRITER | J. LAURA ARMAN
PHOTOGRAPHER | JAMILA MUSCHETTE

TWENTY-FIVE-YEAR-OLD Felisha George is a hip-hop artist from New Jersey who recently starred on Netflix's music competition series, *Rhythm and Flow*.

The show, which was dubbed "Netflix's first talent competition" by *Cosmopolitan*, included Cardi B, T.I. and Chance the Rapper as judges. The 2019 series looked for undiscovered hip-hop artists and aimed to turn them into stars.

The *Emerald* spoke with George about her experience on the show, running for office, and the inspiration for her music.

FELISHA GEORGE ON RHYTHM AND FLOW

George made it into the Top 16 contestants of the show. Her time on the program ended before she could place in the competition. Now, nearly one year after the show premiered—George described how grateful she is for the experience.

However, she said, "I feel the show in general [and everything] kind of happened really fast. There was no time to process what was happening."

"It was, 'okay I'm going to be in a Netflix show, okay no we're recording the show, okay now I got into the top 16, okay this is going really fast,'" George explained.

Although it happened quickly, she said she built a "family-like" bond with the other members of the show.

"Leaving there was very sad [...] because we created so many close relationships," she explained. "You really get close to people when you're in a position like that."

After being home for awhile, George reflected on her time and realized that, "millions of people wanted to be in that position," she said. "So many people auditioned, and sent submissions in, and for me to have gotten that opportunity to showcase myself and what I stand for, what I believe in on such a huge platform, I was really grateful for that experience."

George said that performing just felt natural to her. Though she admitted to being nervous during the audition, she managed to gain her confidence.

She especially praised Cardi B for bringing positive energy during her time in the show.

HER BACKGROUND ON RAP

Late of last year, she managed to get her first album out, *Wash Your Soul*, which has to singles in it.

George describes herself as someone who is "learning, growing, healing."

"I also want people to understand that I'm still cleaning, I'm still healing, I'm still growing, I'm still figuring out, I'm still on a journey. Nothing is for sure right now," said George, as she described her album and reflected on herself.

But her journey in the hip hop industry began long ago.

"My parents are extremely big on hip-hop," George said, as she described her childhood. "Ever since I was a baby, my dad has this huge sound system and we'd listen to Biggie, and TLC. We listened to a lot of Left Eye, we listened to a lot of Lauryn Hill."

George recounted the moments when her family would often ask her to rap, and the times her sister and brother asked for her to rap about McDonalds, "so Mommy and Daddy could take us to McDonalds."

When George reached high school, she knew she wanted to rap, but she wanted to do it differently.

"I want to actually rap what I'm feeling, what I'm experiencing, what I see on a day-to-day basis," George said. But back then, "I didn't have a lot of examples of that, I kind of sheltered myself."

She refused to make raps that would only be a hit because it talks about sex.

Only in college, she decided to take rap seriously. Determined, she knew that, "this is what I want to do. I feel great when I rap, I feel great when I perform," she said.

Back then, George didn't call herself a rapper, though she would perform at lounges and small events to kick start her career. Amazed with her natural talent, people around her convinced George to start recording. Soon after she started recording, she began to post videos of herself rapping on social media—that's when Netflix's *Rhythm and Flow* got a hold of her.

HOW POLITICS INFLUENCED GEORGE'S MUSIC

Confident and bold, George is committed to using her platform and music for the better.

KultureHub mentioned how her music touches upon police brutality, the KKK, mass incarceration, and even her own experience running for office.

"You better watch how you talk here, in the land of the gun," the very powerful line which came from her single, *Wash Your Soul*.

In the midst of becoming a rapper, George ran for office, specifically to be in the Board of Education in her hometown, Maplewood, New Jersey, between the year 2017 and 2018.

It was during her campaign that she said she, "experienced so much racism [and] hatred towards me. At the time, I was probably 22/23."

She was confused about the hate she received when she ran for office. It then inspired her single, *Wash Your Soul*.

"When you put it in a music form, people kind of understand it better," she said. "This is what I experienced on a day-to-day, this is what my friend experiences on a day-to-day [basis]."

"And it's really a message for us. *Wash Your Soul* is for us because we experience all these things [everyday]. But how often do we really look inside of ourselves, and do the work within ourselves to be better?" she asked. "How do we do the work within ourselves, and wash our own souls, and wash [off] what everyone puts on us? Because it's not ours to carry."

"We have to learn how to also heal from negativity. Because if we're never healing, we're just carrying anger and we're carrying all this sadness, and we're carrying all these experiences of our ancestors," George explained.

Though George didn't win the election, she knew many were impacted by the things that she said and did when she was running for office, from the marches, to the sit-ins.

MUSIC FOR OUR HEALING AND CELEBRATION

As George aims to heal through music, she also hopes that her music could be a celebration.

"I feel my music isn't for me," George said. "It's for the listeners, it's for the audience, it's for whoever needs to listen to it. I wanted it to help you heal. I wanted you to see yourself in the album."

"I want people to celebrate themselves—that's EXACTLY what it is!" George exclaimed.

A unique celebration of diversity indeed, as George mentioned that she is a queer Black woman.

Though she doesn't think there are many challenges for her and never received backlash, she said it is mainly because, "I feel I appear as a straight Black woman."

"Now that I'm realizing that, it's also something that I want to speak more about," George said as she realized that some are not as fortunate as her.

George maintains a low profile about her love life, even during *Rhythm and Flow*. George felt that it was none of their business, as she quoted, "When you're on shows like that, they ask you a lot of questions to see what your story is," like "What are we gonna market her towards?"

"I just didn't want my sexuality to be that thing, I didn't want that to be what they're holding and running on because also in those spaces you'll never really know how they'll spin it," George said.

Outside show business, "everyone who knows me knows that I'm a queer Black woman," George said. "I love that I'm a queer Black woman. I love my queer community. I love how we come together and support each other."

For George at least, "I'd say it's been really a great experience. I definitely haven't had a super bad experience just because I'm 'passing' as a straight woman."

As a matter of fact, George dedicated her single, *Moonlight*, to her partner.

"She's also a dancer. Whenever I perform it live, she dances with me," George added. "The whole song is just inspired by her. I talk about dance in that song because she's a dancer. And just how she's helped me to love myself more."

GEORGE'S UPCOMING PROJECTS

When asked about her future projects, the first thing George mentioned was her new single, released this August, with Noriko Shakti, a music producer from Japan, and Lady Skavya, a musician from India.

"The song is absolutely amazing. It's gonna be a beautiful release," George disclosed.

George's upcoming projects do not end there as she described, "people are going to be receiving a lot of fun things, a lot of visuals."

"We just shot a video to *Sweetest Treat* and to *Wash Your Soul*—which is going to be an underwater video, so I'll give you that," she hinted.

As to what the future holds, she wished to perform and collaborate internationally as she spreads joy with her music. "I just wanna fly, I just wanna spread my wings, in ways that I wish," George said.

As we wrapped up the interview, she described a message to people around the world, especially to Black Americans. "We have to heal. It's important for us to heal, whether we see ourselves as hurt or not. Or having experienced an awful life or great life. It's still our job to heal—to do the healing work," George said.



MEDICATING FOR SUCCESS

HOW DRAG QUEEN *LAGANJA ESTRANJA* REMAINS STONED ON THE THRONE

WRITER | KYAHLUNA
PHOTOGRAPHER | ASH DANIELSEN

LAGANJA ESTRANJA NEVER slows down, even in quarantine. From choreographing and writing the short play *Me on YouTube*, and her debut album *HIGHconic*, fast approaching, Estranja takes her THC to go.

"I am a successful stoner," who has "chosen an alternative form of medication," Estranja emphasizes.

Located in L.A., Estranja boasts an impressive resume as a former *RuPaul's Drag Race* queen, founder and choreographer of Laganja's Dance School, musician, and cannabis activist.

"As someone who's always on the go with a million jobs throughout my day, I need a medicine that's going to keep me active," says Estranja.

While one could say she's a sativa girl, it's particularly the lemon and tangerine terpenes that are benefiting her the most, Estranja explains.

Terpenes are aromatic hydrocarbons found in many plants such as peppermint, rosemary, lemons, and cannabis, according to *Medical Jane's* Introduction to Terpenes. Estranja specifically favors the citrusy limonene terpene.

"I am putting myself through a lot of physical pain with drag, with the tucking, super gluing earrings to my ears, the nails," says Estranja, "so again, the cannabis helps to alleviate some of the pain."

Limonene's anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties can provide significant pain relief. The compound enhances mood, is a dietary aid, and protects and possibly fights against cancer cells. Currently, it is undergoing trials as a treatment for breast cancer, according to a scientific study in São Paulo, Brazil.

Yet, Estranja, born Jay Jackson in Dallas, Texas, could never imagine forefronting the cannabis drag community.

"I chose the name Laganja Estranja because I thought it was cool... but I had no idea that one-day people would be waiting in lines at my meet and greets with joints for me!" exclaims Estranja.

Before she became a female impersonator, Estranja dreamed of performing on Broadway and was a "good boy. I got all A's. My parents were high school counselors," she remembers.

Estranja first experienced cannabis at 18 years old after a dance injury left her in chronic pain. She found it relieved discomfort and helped her to sleep and eat healthier.

"I really believe that because my first introduction to the plant was as medicine, as a way to be a better creator, that I had a different lens to the plant," Estranja says.

Estranja used cannabis to enhance her creativity and focus on dance, earning the title U.S. Presidential Scholar of the Arts as a teenager. Wearing a pink triangle pin, she performed in front of then President George H.W. Bush.

After high school, Estranja relocated to attend the California Institute of the Arts, eventually earning a Bachelor's of Fine Arts degree in dance and choreography. But it was not until 2011 that the Estranja persona debuted at an amateur contest at Micky's West Hollywood, a popular gay nightclub.

After winning the competition, Estranja threw herself into the spotlight as a regular showgirl at the club.

Estranja competed on season six of LogoTV's *RuPaul's Drag Race* in 2014. Due to federal regulations specific to production sets, Estranja was not allowed to medicate during the showing. Instead, she turned to a substance that was allowed on set — alcohol, which helped relieve the stress and pain of rigorous drag performances.

"I was extremely depressed and almost lost my life and cannabis pulled me out of that hole," Estranja explains. "I found this plant to really save me from many situations. I was sober three years after my spin on *RuPaul's Drag Race* where I was dealing with alcohol."

Estranja began her road to recovery, asking herself, "What am I trying to escape?" Alcohol allowed her to escape the physical and mental pressure of performing. It boosted her confidence and allowed her to relax. That was when she turned to cannabis again.

Estranja finds consuming cannabis is a helpful alcohol harm reduction method.

"I decided through self-discovery that it was a choice. I was choosing to be an alcoholic, just like I was choosing to be depressed," Estranja explains. "If you want to be the most happy you've ever been, you've got to choose that first. When I am medicated, I am able to make that choice a lot easier."

Many questioned Estranja's sobriety as she continued medicating with cannabis. Yet despite the general classification of cannabis as a recreational drug, research finds the plant successfully reduces the harmful effects of alcohol withdrawal and usage, according to *The Harm Reduction Journal*.

"It became something that when I was sad, or I was depressed, I was able to smoke cannabis and look at my life in a more grateful way, in a more humble way, and I think it really kept me grounded," says Estranja.

“I had no idea what it really meant to be an activist..”

..I just knew that this plant had saved my life.”

- Laganja Estranja

After three years of sobriety, Estranja can now have a drink at dinner with friends. Estranja does not believe she is cured of alcoholism; but attributes her recovery to the benefits of cannabis, therapy, a stable support network, and introspection. Instead of getting tipsy before a performance, Estranja gets high to relieve the strain of dance and to reinvigorate her energy for the audience.

Cannabis also allows her to evaluate her impact and responsibilities.

“I chose to not drink. I choose now to moderate, and I choose to continue to live with my eyes open and aware of the facts that I could easily slip, but that’s a choice,” Estranja states.

In 2015, Estranja toured the production #TeamToo.Much with drag star Gia Gunn to promote safety and substance moderation, specifically within the drag community. She realized that a queen could not be a queen without a platform. Cannabis pulled her out of a dark place and she wanted to share her story with others.

Estranja partners with brands she believes stand for her communities, not just those that “slap a rainbow on it” in June. For Pride Month 2019, she collaborated with Roxanne Dennant of Fruit Slabs of L.A. to create edible gummies. The campaign focused on celebrating the LGBTQ+ community emphasizing the liberation of gender expression.

“I am really sure to partner with companies who are not only talking the talk but walking the walk and making sure their staff is diverse, that they’re hiring people of color... I pick and choose who I stay in contact with, and I am lucky that I have that ability,” Estranja explains.

Estranja is certainly not the only one interested in accountability this year. In a recent series of tweets, Miss Fame, a former *RuPaul’s Drag Race* contestant, called out drag queens, including Estranja, who created content with Jeffrey Star, a YouTube beauty influencer exposed for racist and problematic actions, who have not addressed their connection to him. When asked about this, Estranja states, there is no relationship between them, and there never was one behind the scenes in the first place.

“It’s all about accountability in oneself. You have to hold yourself accountable, and if you can’t do that, well, then you’re not really a person I really want to be involved with,” she continues. “My relationship with Jeffrey Star is my relationship. I didn’t make some big public statement about how we are not friends. I don’t trash him in public because I don’t need to do that. Karma will get everyone.”

Today, Estranja enjoys participating in the online cannabis community. “This time at home has really given me a chance to focus on my creative side,” she says. She often appears on WeedTube and is uploading regular content to her YouTube channel as well.

Estranja keeps her tiara on her head and her seat at the throne as a successful stoner. If she could say anything to a cannabis skeptic, she’d say, “to judge a plant that saves someone else’s life, I would just say you might want to take a look at that, gorg.”



NUPOL KIAZOLU

WRITER | MELISSA HUTSELL
PHOTOGRAPHER | TYLA BARNES

A T 20 YEARS OLD, Nupol Kiazolu has shut down highways and pageant stages, becoming a leader in what is now one of the largest civil rights movements in history.

Kiazolu is the president of Black Lives Matter of Greater New York, Miss Liberia USA, and is the founder and CEO of the national voting campaign, Vote 2000.

In 2018, Hawk Newsome, the former President of Black Lives Matter Greater New York, told *Teen Vogue* that the then 18-year-old was like, “a young Sojourner Truth or Harriet Tubman.”

“When she speaks, she’s not afraid to make people uncomfortable, and she’s impassioned,” Newsome continued. “She adds something to her arguments that really makes her appeal to her generation.”

BORN IN BROWNSVILLE

Kiazolu launched Vote 2000 in 2017 with the goal to educate disenfranchised communities on the civic and electoral processes in America, and get them registered to vote.

The following year, she partnered with DoSomething.org to register more than 100,000 young people.

The campaign is currently gearing up to raise those numbers even higher, says Kiazolu — particularly in communities of color.

According to the Center for American Progress, “In 2016, 9.5 million American adults — most of whom were people of color — lacked full voting rights.”

Vote 2000 is planning to hit major cities across the country within disenfranchised communities “to target those communities that are overlooked,” she says.

“[...] People don’t want to come to disenfranchised communities, aka “the Hood,” Kiazolu explains. “A lot of people advocate on our behalves, [but they] never come into our communities because of the predisposed biases they may have.”

“But [...] I’m from the hood,” she says.

Kiazolu is from Brownsville, Brooklyn — one of the poorest parts of New York City.

According to the New York City Health, “37% of Brownsville residents live below the Federal Poverty Level; it is the poorest neighborhood in Brooklyn and the seventh-poorest neighborhood in NYC.”

“We need people that are from our communities to advocate on our behalf,” she says.

NONETHELESS, SHE PERSISTED

Kiazolu has been an activist since the age of 12.

“Trayvon Martin’s Tragic murder is what pushed me into activism,” she tells *Emerald*.

Martin was just 17 when he was shot and killed while walking home from a convenient store after buying a bag of skittles and a bottle of juice. According to several reports, his killer, George Zimmerman, told a 911 dispatcher that “the young man in a dark hoodie, a gray hoodie” was a “suspicious guy,” reports *NPR*.

At the time of Martin’s murder, Kiazolu says she could not fully articulate how she felt, “but I knew that I was angry, and that I had to do something.”

So she put on a grey hoodie with the message, “do I look suspicious?” taped on her, and grabbed a pack of Skittles and a bottle of iced tea, and went to school.

It caused conflict within her middle school, she explains, which had a predominantly white administration. “They thought I was being too political,” she says. “Nonetheless, I persisted.”

Kiazolu refused to take her hoodie off. As a result, she was written up for suspension, “ironically by my history teacher,” she explains.

Her only ally, she says, was her math teacher, a Black woman, Ms. Gibbs. “[She] risked her entire career by making the decision to march down to the principal’s office with me in solidarity with her hoodie on,” Kiazolu explains.

Instead of suspension, Kiazolu’s principal sent her home to build a case.

“So that’s exactly what I did,” she continues. She researched her first amendments rights, and rights as a middle school student. “Then I came across Tinker vs Des Moines,” which Kiazolu explains is the Supreme Court case that established the rights for students to peacefully protest on school grounds.

She won her case, and when she arrived at the lunch-room afterward, “literally every single student had their hoodies on with the same exact message taped on the back,” she describes. “At that moment, I knew being an activist and organizer was my calling.”

UNITING THE AFRICAN AND AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES

Kiazolu recently accomplished another dream — becoming a pageant queen.

“I’ve always been interested in pageants,” she explains. “One of My favorite shows growing up was *Toddlers and Tiaras*. I would watch all the Miss USA and Miss Universe Pageants; I always pictured [myself] walking on a pageant stage.”

But she did not have enough confidence, she says. So she spent an entire year preparing herself for the competition.

“I didn’t have enough money to pay for a coach for anything like that,” she continues, which required her to self-train.

On July 26th, 2019 — Liberia’s Independence Day — she competed and won.

As Kiazolu’s first pageant, she says she felt like an underdog. “But I left it all on the stage by being my most authentic self, and I won. Now I am Miss Liberia USA.”

Kiazolu’s reign has been extended from 2020 to 2021 due to the novel coronavirus pandemic. Her platform is focused on uniting the African and African American communities by working with organizations in Liberia, and raising awareness and funds for infrastructure, education and healthcare in the West African nation.

“THIS IS NOT JUST ABOUT OUR FUTURE, IT IS ABOUT OUR PRESENT”

Kiazolu is a full-time political science and pre-law student at Howard University, a Historically Black College University (HBCU) located in Howard, Virginia.

When she is not on campus, she is on the frontlines of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Kiazolu says it is important for her to stay active in the uprising, “because this is not just about our future, it is about our present.”

Her work has so far brought her to uprisings in Charlottesville, Minneapolis and Louisville.

On July 14th, 2020 Kiazolu was arrested in Louisville, Kentucky while protesting at the home of state Attorney General Daniel Cameron’s home. She was there to demand justice for Breonna Taylor.

She and several other activists were detained, and held in close proximity in cages without food, water or hygiene supplies, including hand sanitizer.

Those cages are visible in a video, which has now gone viral, filmed by Kiazolu while in jail.

“They literally have us chained to cages like animals here,” she says in the video.

“When they ran out of cages [...] they put all these Black people on this chain of cuffs,” she tells *Emerald*. “They looked like slaves getting off of a boat. The visuals; it was just so disturbing.”

“IT WAS LITERALLY A WAR ZONE”

Kiazolu is no stranger to the perils of protests.

In response to the killing of George Floyd, Kiazolu traveled to Minneapolis, Minnesota.

“May 29th, I will never forget that day. I literally saw everything burn to the ground,” she says, describing it as a scene from *The Purge*.

“I am glad I made it out of there alive,” she says.

However, the uprisings in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017 still hold the number one spot as the most traumatic experience yet.

“*This is not just about our Future, it is about our Present.*”

— N. Kiazolu

Kiazolu traveled to Charlottesville to counter-protest the Unite the Right Rally, which occurred from August 11th-12th, 2017.

“I decided] to go down to Charlotteville at 17 years old because the Black community there needed us; they needed bodies on the line,” she explains.

But, she says solemnly, “nobody could have expected what happened that day in Charlottesville.”

Three people were killed during the events. As *TIME* reported:

“At one point in the afternoon, a vehicle drove into a crowd of counter-protesters marching through the downtown area before speeding away, resulting in [the death of Heather Heyer] and leaving more than a dozen others injured. State police later reported the crash of a helicopter that was monitoring the events in Charlottesville, killing two troopers.”

“It was literally a war zone in Charlottesville that day,” she says.

She was both verbally and physically assaulted — at one point, was punched in the back by a white supremacist.

Though traumatic, Kiazolu was undeterred by the experience.

“A lot of people ask me why I am still an activist today. As crazy as it sounds, Charlottesville pushed me to do more,” she continues. “It showed me how far we have not come with race relations in this country, although America likes to portray itself as this post-racial utopia.”

“OUT OF THAT UNCOMFORTABILITY COMES PROGRESS”

Kiazolu is focused on changing conversations about racism in America. That starts with “being honest about what racism really is in this country,” she explains.

“The U.S. has purposefully mis educated millions and millions of people for generations on what racism actually is. We are taught that racism is just a person-to-person thing,” she says.

“But it goes far beyond not liking a person because of their skin color; it’s systemic.”

The word itself is self-explanatory, she says — yet, “Americans have done such a phenomenal job at brain-washing people to not to look at the broader scope of this issue.”

“We need to start having these uncomfortable but necessary conversations about who benefits from racism — and who bears the brunt of it,” she adds. “Out of that uncomfortability comes progress.”

THE GENERATIONAL DIVIDE

As a young activist, Kiazolu says she often experiences agism. “I see this every single day in this movement as a young Black woman.”

“[Older] adults seem to forget that we are capable of articulating our experiences and can speak to what’s going on in this country,” she continues. “They forget to recognize that Gen Z has propelled this movement to be the largest movement in world history [...] through our use of our digital resources.”

Gen Z is portrayed as an apathetic generation, says Kiazolu. “But no — there are Gen Z organizers like myself who use social media as a tool to galvanize millions of people from around the world to push this movement forward.”

“IT DOESN’T MATTER HOW YOU START”

As an activist with an international platform, Kiazolu says she sometimes feels overwhelmed.

That’s why she takes moments of self-care and advocates for mental health.

“[It is] imperative that we open a dialogue in our community [about mental health],” and create safe spaces for open dialogue, she adds. “Especially for young Black organizers because this movement is definitely physically, emotionally and mentally taxing.”

“I hope to be an example that it doesn’t make you weak to express your emotions; it makes you stronger, and it’s empowering to show a sense of openness.”

Kiazolu hopes to be an example for all Americans who dream of success.

“In 2036 I will be running for president [...] It means a lot to me because I want to be at a place where I am the epitome that it doesn’t matter where you start, it’s how you finish,” she adds. “I really want to make that a reality for Americans because right now, that is not a reality.”

Although she is proud of her accomplishment so far, she says, “I’m also not proud that I am an anomaly.”

HE WAS YOUNG, JUST LIKE ME

Before his death on July 17th, 2020, Representative John Lewis penned an open letter in *New York Times*. In it, he passed his legacy to young activists like Kiazolu.

“Ordinary people with extraordinary vision can redeem the soul of America by getting in what I call good trouble, necessary trouble. Voting and participating in the democratic process are key. The vote is the most powerful nonviolent change agent you have in a democratic society. You must use it because it is not guaranteed. You can lose it.”

That letter brought Kiazolu to tears, she says. “It really reinvigorated this spirit inside me and pushed me to do more because he literally left an entire legacy of service to our community.”

“I will do my best as a young activist and organizer because when he got into this movement, he was young just like me.”

A motto of Black Lives Matter Greater New York is, “protest without strategy is an empty threat.” Accordingly, the organization recently released *The Black Act* — a detailed list of actions needed to create opportunity for Black and Brown communities.

Visit BlackOpportunities.com for a full layout of the agenda.



PHOTOGRAPHER | TYLA BARNES

NGAIO BEALUM



WRITER | JOHN LEE
PHOTOGRAPHER | KATY KARNS

AS THE WORLD AROUND burns and city streets become dark arenas for grim clashes between protesters and police officers, it becomes harder to see the light that even the smallest flame from one little lighter can bring. Perhaps it is time to embrace the warzone of political discourse with some laughter.

Always an advocate for amusement and a master of blending lighthearted tones with hefty topics is Ngaio Bealum — an activist, comedian, and writer that has folded his comedy, his writing, and his activism together for decades.

The *Emerald* sat down for a Zoom interview with Bealum on a warm summer day to discuss his style, his inspiration, and cannabis.

For Bealum, cannabis use never took substantial root in his life until he went to college. There, he began to question the laws and stigma surrounding the people who use it.

When asked about how his involvement in cannabis activism began, Bealum told *The Emerald Magazine*, “Mostly by showing up. You just go to a protest and you go to an event and you meet people.”

It is these same people and the many more behind them that Bealum speaks to and for.

“You meet people from everywhere; from all over, from all walks of life,” he adds. “That’s one of the beautiful things about weed... [you meet people from] all different cultures, all different races, [...] all different hobbies.”

While Bealum recognizes that “people like smoking weed,” he knows many are criminalized for using cannabis. As such, he works to raise awareness for those prosecuted for cannabis crimes.

Bealum sat up and leaned into the Zoom call as a note of concern and of conviction colored his tone. “A lot of times we get away from the social justice aspect, in this pursuit of the cannabis industry and cannabis millionaires,” he explains. “Medical cannabis, the cannabis legalization movement, first and foremost, is [about] social justice.”

It’s about, “keeping people out of jail,” he adds. “[These laws] are wasteful, it’s not productive; it doesn’t fix any problems.”

Much as the interest in cannabis had developed over time, so too did his enthusiasm for laughter, which grew from a young age. Comedy, and particularly stand-up, fascinated Bealum and became a channel that he found he was quite talented at.

“My parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles all had all kinds of crazy comedy records,” he says. “Richard Pryor, Red Fox, Bob Newhart, Jonathan Winters, they had all these comedy records that I just listened to over and over and over again.”

He would later use those same records to get more laughs during street acts. With a full chuckle he went on, “I was working at Pier 39 [in San Francisco]; I didn’t really want to sell t-shirts anymore and I saw the street performers making bank, so I learned to juggle and became a juggler.”

As the performances became more manicured, Bealum realized that he possessed a love for laughter and a knack for performance. He heartily attributes his passion to his mentors, including Diane Amos and Robert “Butterfly Man” Nelson, who Bealum says helped give him the tools to succeed as a comedian.

Even a cursory glance at a written column, a quick sneak at a video clip, or a one minute conversation reveals Bealum’s ability to simultaneously educate and entertain.

“If you listen to my act you can hear my feelings on the matter but I’m not super overt about it,” he adds. “I’m a big fan of education.”

When these two aspects of activism and of comedy coalesce, Bealum’s final product is not some shoddy and overly loud, or poorly constructed soap box. Instead, the product is gracefully tactful and robustly hilarious.

As a writer of a column in the *Sacramento News and Review* and many others, Bealum points to these different styles of production and presentation as the all important mastery of tone. Just as it is with the foundations of his cannabis advocacy, it comes down to the people — you need to know your audience.

“If I’m writing a cannabis advice column or an opinion column, my natural humor shines through. But the goal is not to be funny, funny, funny, but to be informative and entertaining. It’s a different mindset, but you know it’s all just weed and sex,” he says with a grin.

Bealum compared the state of cannabis now to what it was just 20 or 30 years ago, saying, “There’s way less danger in a lot of areas, which is the most important thing. Back in the day when you had an unlicensed cannabis club, they used to come and raid you, they’d send the DEA or they’d send all the sheriffs and come and raid your whole shop and throw people in jail,” he says. “Now they send you a letter with a fine.”

When addressing the Black Lives Matter movement, and nationwide protests, Bealum explains that, “Lately I’ve been filled with rage and hope,” he adds. “[I’m] trying to let my anger motivate me but not guide me. It fills me with hope because I feel like we can go further, faster. We have more people on our side now, who have really looked around.”

While the movement inches forward, recognizing the importance of cracking a joke and easing in a smile, is Ngaio Bealum.



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