IN CHICAGO HOUSE BALLS, PEOPLE IN THE LOCAL BLACK LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY COMPETE FOR PRIZES IN VARIOUS CATEGORIES.

A "HOUSE" is a group of like-minded LGBTQ+ people who join together for community and support. It's a family. They are people that share the identity of being black and queer with you and they just want to make sure that you are safe.

"YOU HAVE A MOTHER, YOU HAVE A FATHER, YOU HAVE A SISTER, YOU HAVE A BROTHER. YOU HAVE SOMEWHERE TO STAY."

"YOU'VE GOT SOMEONE THAT ENCOURAGES YOU. YOU HAVE SOMEONE THAT GETS YOU TO SCHOOL, BACK AND FORTH TO APPOINTMENTS."

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HOUSE BALLS -- WHICH ARE NOW HELD IN CITIES ALL OVER THE WORLD -- CELEBRATE BLACK & LATINO LGBTQ+ CULTURE.

BY Josh Neufeld

NOEL GREEN
ALL OF THEM HAVE LONG BEEN ENGAGED WITH PROMOTING PUBLIC HEALTH IN CHICAGO.

LAST YEAR, THEY SAW THAT COVID-19 WAS DISPROPORTIONATELY AFFECTING CHICAGO’S BLACK AND LATINO COMMUNITIES—

COMPOUNDING THE ISSUE, VACCINATION RATES AMONG THOSE COMMUNITIES LAGGED BEHIND THE GENERAL POPULATION.

BLACK RESIDENTS MADE UP ONLY 18.7% OF CHICAGO RESIDENTS WHO HAD RECEIVED THEIR FIRST VACCINE SHOT.

HE’S ALSO A DANCER, A RAPPER AND A SINGER. JAHARI AND I TALKED ABOUT HIM USING HIS CREATIVITY TO FURTHER HIS WORK IN THE LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY.

GIVEN HIS HOUSE BALL CONNECTIONS, JAHARI SUGGESTED THAT RANDI’S AND NOEL’S GROUPS PARTNER TOGETHER TO BRING COVID VACCINES TO THE SEASON’S UPCOMING BALLS.

JAHARI CALLED ME UP AND WAS LIKE, "YOU GOTTA MEET RANDI!"
At the first ball they attended, Randi, Natasha, and Noel saw the joy of the event...

It's family, it's food... it's drinks, it's love.

But also the real need for vaccinations against COVID.

It was packed to the brim.

We were very stressed about the vaccination component.

Lack of access. Them feeling like they have to travel too far or it just wasn't readily available to them.

So the team decided to...

Bring vaccinations to them so that it was accessible, it was free, and it actually solves the issue.

One reason for the low-vaccination rate in this community was...

They connected with Chicago's COVID Rapid Response Team (a decentralized, interprofessional group of nurses, residents, students, and faculty) --

As well as LGBTQ+ community leaders like Jahari and Father Kentrele Gucci...
THE TEAM SET UP OUTSIDE THE NEXT HOUSE BALL...

TO MAKE THE PROCESS MORE EFFICIENT AND CONVENIENT, THEY DECIDED TO OFFER THE JOHNSON & JOHNSON ONE-SHOT VACCINE.

AND TO GET THINGS STARTED, JAHARI HIMSELF GOT VACCINATED.

IF I WAS GOING OUT IN MY COMMUNITY TO BE AN ADVOCATE FOR VACCINATIONS, IT WAS IMPORTANT FOR ME TO BE THE MESSAGE THAT I BRING.

EVEN SO, THE OFFER OF THE VACCINE SOON ENCOUNTERED RESISTANCE.

A LOT OF PEOPLE TALKED ABOUT THE TUSKEGEE SYPHILIS STUDY...
IN THE INFAMOUS TUSKEGEE EXPERIMENTS OF THE MID-20TH CENTURY, THE U.S. PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE WATCHED HUNDREDS OF BLACK MEN SUFFER AND DIE FROM SYPHILIS IN ORDER TO "BETTER UNDERSTAND" THE DISEASE.

EVEN FOR JAHARI--AN INTEGRAL MEMBER OF THE TEAM--GETTING VACCINATED HADN'T BEEN AN EASY DECISION...

I HAD ALL THE QUESTIONS. I WAS EXTREMELY APPREHENSIVE.

OF COURSE YOU REVISIT THE TUSKEGEE SITUATION AND ALL THE OTHER SITUATIONS WHERE OUR MEDICAL INFORMATION HAS BEEN MISUSED OR PROFITED OFF US WITHOUT US GETTING ANYTHING BACK.

I AM VERY WELL AWARE OF THIS COUNTRY'S RELATIONSHIP WITH AFRICAN AMERICAN PEOPLE AS IT PERTAINS TO MEDICAL PROCESSES.

THERE'S A LOT OF MISTRUST--"OH GREAT, WE'RE THE TEST CASES AGAIN."

SUCH AS J. MARION SIMS' 1840s EXPERIMENTS ON BLACK WOMEN AS HE DEVELOPED THE FIELD OF GYNECOLOGY...

AFTER MARION SIMS: GYNECOLOGIC SURGEON, CIRCA 1952, FROM "GREAT MOMENTS IN MEDICINE" SERIES BY ROBERT THOM.
THE GOVERNMENT IS PUTTING MICROCHIPS IN THE VACCINE, TRYING TO INFECT YOUR BODY. I'VE SEEN TIKTOKS THAT SAY IT WAS DEVELOPED TOO QUICKLY. I DON'T THINK IT'S SAFE.

I DON'T THINK IT'S SAFE -- I WANT TO TALK TO MY MOM. I DON'T WANT ANYONE PLAYING WITH MY BODY OR WITH MY GENES.

AND AS DR. LISA A. COOPER OF JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY HAS EXPLAINED...

IF THE REST OF SOCIETY IS SUBJECT TO MISINFORMATION, IT AFFECTS PEOPLE WHO ARE ALREADY VULNERABLE IN A LARGER WAY.

PEOPLE WHO ARE NOT AS EDUCATED... DON'T HAVE ACCESS TO PEOPLE WITH GREATER INFORMATION.

IF [SO], YOU ARE AT THE MERCY OF SOCIAL MEDIA OR WHOEVER.

WE HEAR, "PEOPLE ARE DYING, PEOPLE ARE DYING," BUT IF YOU DON'T KNOW ANYONE WHO HAS DIED FROM IT...

I HAVEN'T BEEN SOCIAL DISTANCING THIS WHOLE TIME AND I'VE BEEN FINE.

I DON'T THINK IT'S SAFE -- I HAVE DIABETES.

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PEOPLE WHO ARE NOT AS EDUCATED... DON'T HAVE ACCESS TO PEOPLE WITH GREATER INFORMATION.

YOU DON'T KNOW WHO TO TRUST.

MISINFORMATION ALSO FUELED MUCH OF THE HESITANCY ON DISPLAY. THE GOVERNMENT IS PUTTING MICROCHIPS IN THE VACCINE, TRYING TO INFECT YOUR BODY.

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WATCH THIS VIDEO...
DESPITE THE TEAM’S TALKING TO HUNDREDS OF ATTENDEES OF THE BALL THAT DAY, ONLY A FEW PEOPLE AGREED TO BE VACCINATED.

“There was a lot of pushback.

From people who just did not want to engage with the vaccine...

We’ve all lived in fear for so long with COVID, and (getting vaccinated) is just another piece of COVID.

Knowing another house ball was coming up on the schedule, the team reappraised their strategy. Jahari’s input was essential...

In order for this to be successful in any regard it has to come from the people who represent the community that we’re going out and working with.

The people who represent the community need to be the face of the work.

And they implemented a trauma-informed approach, utilizing the diffusion of innovation theory.

"...to that it was done out in the open so people didn’t want to be, like, mainlined or teased by people who had been anti-vax."

I am going to trust someone that looks like me who says ‘Don’t do it’ before I trust you.

Sigh.
A TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH is about understanding that members of this community have already had so many NEGATIVE experiences with institutional medicine and the government.

THERE’S A BIG BARRIER TO TRUST THAT HAS TO BE OVERCOME.

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THERE’S A BIG BARRIER TO TRUST THAT HAS TO BE OVERCOME.

THE DIFFUSION OF INNOVATION THEORY looks at how -- and how FAST -- new technologies spread.

THERE’S ALWAYS THOSE PEOPLE WHO WE LOOK AT AS EARLY ADOPTERS.

"THE LATE-STAGE ADOPTERS ARE THE ONES WHO ARE MOST AT RISK."

"THEY HAVE BEEN THE MOST VULNERABLE. THEY HAVE EXPERIENCED THE MOST HARM."

"THEY LOOK TO THE EARLY- AND MID-STAGE ADOPTERS AS THEIR CAVEAT OF KNOWLEDGE AND TO TELL THEM THAT IT’S SAFE."

LET’S GET THIS DONE!

"THEY THINK ABOUT WHO WE LOOK AT AS EARLY ADOPTERS."

"THE LATE-STAGE ADOPTERS ARE THE ONES WHO ARE MOST AT RISK."

"THEY HAVE BEEN THE MOST VULNERABLE. THEY HAVE EXPERIENCED THE MOST HARM."

"THEY LOOK TO THE EARLY- AND MID-STAGE ADOPTERS AS THEIR CAVEAT OF KNOWLEDGE AND TO TELL THEM THAT IT’S SAFE."
IN ADVANCE OF THE NEXT EVENT, **Palm Cards** which featured house ball icons and legends who were promoting vaccination were printed and distributed to the house ball community.

**Incentives** for attendees included guaranteeing one’s place in line for entry to the ball...

...Privacy for those getting vaccinated...

...And free entry for those who got the shot.

WE HAD SO MANY PEOPLE COMING UP TO US AND SAYING, "I SAW YOU AND MARIO* ON THE PALM CARDS AND THAT'S WHAT MADE ME FEEL AT EASE ABOUT GETTING VACCINATED."

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*Legendary Father Mario Balenciaga
ALTHOUGH WE DIDN’T HAVE THIS BIG MASS NUMBER OF INDIVIDUALS WHO GOT VACCINATED AT EITHER EVENT, THE THING I WANT TO ACKNOWLEDGE IS: SO MANY PEOPLE -- THEIR MINDS BEGAN TO BE CHANGED.

THE CONVERSATIONS BEGAN TO BE HAD.

MAKE SURE YOU GUYS GO DOWNSTAIRS AND GET VACCINATED!

THEY [GOT ME]. I AM NOT A MUTANT NOW, I AM NOT A MUTANT!

MAKE SURE YOU GUYS GET VACCINATED, Y’ALL SEE [I GOT] MINE.

EVEN THE M.C. OF THE BALL GOT THE SHOT -- AND POKED FUN AT VACCINE MISINFORMATION.

LATER THAT YEAR, JAHARI AND THE TEAM ORGANIZED ANOTHER MIND-CHANGING VACCINATION EVENT -- #JAMOUTSAVELIVES.

WE'RE USING OUR VOICES THEY FEEL LIKE THEY TAKIN’ THEIR CHOICES THE MISINFORMATION, THE COMMUNICATION IT’S TIME THAT WE QUIET THE NOISES

WHEN YOU SEE THE PALM CARDS, WHEN YOU SEE THE VIDEO, IT’S LEGENDS OF OUR COMMUNITY THAT ARE REPRESENTED --

-- WHERE JAHARI RECEIVED HIS BOOSTER SHOT,

-- AS OPPOSED TO A CIS-GENDER CAUCASIAN MALE OR FEMALE TRYING TO DELIVER A MESSAGE TO A BLACK OR BROWN PERSON ABOUT WHY THEY SHOULD BE DOING THIS.
THE WHOLE TEAM -- AS WELL AS UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS COLLEGE OF NURSING COLLEAGUES CRYSTAL PATIL, PhD, AND ALICIA MATTHEWS, PhD -- WROTE AN EDITORIAL IN THE AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PUBLIC HEALTH ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCES.

Ballroom Icons and the Power to Promote COVID-19 Vaccination Among Black and Brown LGBTQ+ Individuals

RACE, SEXUAL ORIENTATION, AND GENDER IDENTITY

WITH EVERY VACCINE GIVEN, THAT IS ONE LIFE SAVED.

WHEN YOU SEE ALL THESE PEOPLE AROUND YOU DYING FROM THIS THING, IT WAS A NO-BRAINER FOR ME TO USE MY VOICE AND MY PLATFORM.

TO SET AN EXAMPLE FOR MY SONS AND DAUGHTERS AND THE COMMUNITY I CALL FAMILY, I HAVE TO BE THE MESSAGE THAT I BRING.

NOTHING IS MORE SATISFYING THAN KNOWING SOMEONE MADE A HEALTHY CHOICE BECAUSE OF SOMETHING YOU DID.

NEVER THE END.