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## The 5th Annual Gentlemen's Ball Raises Funds for Atlanta's Mental Health & Youth Programs

by Winnie McCroy  
EDGE Editor  
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On Saturday, October 15th at the Atlanta Marriott Marquis, the 5th Annual Gentlemen's Ball will raise funds for The Gentlemen's Foundation. The night is dedicated to honoring those who have demonstrated a commitment to social change through the enhancement of the quality of life within the minority LGBTQ community.

"The Gentlemen's Foundation was born out of the need to celebrate our differences and shine a light on the multi-faced nature of the men in our community; to highlight their achievements, their strength, their endurance, their passion, creativity, and commitment to social activism," said Founders Juan & Gee Smalls.

This year's event boasts a Harlem Renaissance theme, and is one that you don't want to miss. They will have casino gaming during the cocktail hour, red carpet interviews, a live band playing tunes from the era, a poignant tribute to our fallen brothers and sisters, spectacular interludes from the hit stage-play "The Dingalogues," and much more! "Oh, and we can't forget to mention the unlimited cocktails, three-course meal, and stellar live entertainment," said organizers.

Guests will enjoy an evening highlighted with unlimited signature cocktails and the soulful sounds of the roaring '20s as The Gentlemen's Foundation brings the Harlem Renaissance to Atlanta. Community activist Darnell L. Moore and television personality Miss Lawrence ("Real Housewives of Atlanta" and "Empire") will serve as the hosts.

"Not only is The Gentlemen's Ball a fundraising effort, it is our flagship program," said the Smalls. "Each year we have an awards program, The Gentlemen's Ball Honors, where we award six gentlemen, including one ally, who have augmented the richness of our community and who, through consistency and longevity, have achieved success in a chosen profession or career, who tirelessly devote themselves to community service."

Honorees & Nominees include: Founder of FTM Fitness World Neo Sandja (Gentleman of Service); Senator Vincent Fort (Gentleman of Alliance); Political Strategist Devin Barrington Ward (Gentleman of Promise); Award-winning Journalist Darian Aaron (Gentleman of Excellence); Bishop OC Allen; HuffPost Live's Karamo Brown; Photographer Olubode Shawn Brown; Board President for Latino LinQ Leo Martinez; Political Organizer Frank Leon Roberts; Comedian Sampson McCormick; "Love & Hip Hop": Hollywood's Milan Christopher; Urban Pop Vocalist Damien Crawford; "The DL Chronicles" Producers Deondray & Quincy Gossfield; and Musician & Activist Anthony Antoine.

"In 2011, we had an idea to produce a 2nd Chance Prom for the LGBTQ community because chances are, when we were in high school, people our age may not have had the prom experience of their dreams for a myriad of reason: being in the closet, shame, stigma, you name it," said the Smalls. "During the planning phase we decided to name the event 'The Gentlemen's Ball.' It had a nice ring to it and we thought that it was high time to bring the gentlemanly nature back! The Gentlemen's Ball quickly morphed into an event that celebrated what we deemed the True Gentlemen: gay, bi, and trans men of color who are confident in self, generous in giving, and proud to stand tall in their truth."

The first Gentlemen's Ball took place on 11.11.11, and there weren't many diverse representations of gay, bi, and trans men of color in the media, said the Smalls. Gay men of color were often only portrayed as being ashamed of themselves, living on the 'Down Low', or wearing heels, makeup, and handbags -- the straight female's sidekick, if you will.



(Source: [www.TheGentlemensFoundation.org](http://www.TheGentlemensFoundation.org))

Although there's nothing wrong with dressing in drag or having a straight girlfriend, the Smalls said, "Our issue was that those images no longer represented who we were as a whole. It didn't provide a picture of the vastness of our community."

A portion of the proceeds is dedicated to providing the metro-Atlanta area with an array of programs geared towards HIV/AIDS awareness, prevention and treatment along with boot camps that focus on providing resources for those dealing with depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and other mental illnesses.

"Our short term goals are to continue to celebrate the positivity that emanates from the men doing great work in the

community and society at large," they said. "Hopefully that will inspire more young men to honor themselves by living an authentic life and to make better life choices. Our programmatic goals are to expand mPact2, our mentorship program, and eventually open a drop-in center. We are also hoping to start linking men to mental health care within the next year through our mental health initiative, Circle of Trust. Everything that we do is in an effort to support our mission to promote optimal wellness through a holistic programming model: physical, mental, social, financial, and spiritual."

The Smalls say there has been an overwhelming response from not only the local Atlanta LGBTQ community of color but the collective community world-wide. They receive inquiries daily asking how to join the movement, or how they can be a part in some way.

"To be quite honest, the growth that we have experienced is a direct reflection of the community's desire to be the change and their tangible efforts to make an impact," said the Smalls. "We operate solely on the shoulders of our Board of Directors, Members, Advisory Board, and Volunteers -- none of whom get paid. We couldn't be more grateful."

The men hope to raise at least \$10,000 this year, although they say that breaking even would be just fine. Since the event and foundation is so new, it's been a challenge for them to secure the funding needed to fully execute the event and programming that the event raises funds for, so thus far it's been a personal investment -- one they believe in and know will turn into a monetary success as long as they continue to stay the course and do the work.

"There is nothing better than to see every letter of the rainbow represented: the L, G, B, T, and the Q! The ball is definitely about unity, love, empowerment, and authenticity," they said.

*The Gentlemen's Ball will be held on Saturday, October 15th at the Atlanta Marriott Marquis, 265 Peachtree Center Avenue, Atlanta, GA 30303. For information or tickets, visit [www.TheGentlemensFoundation.org](http://www.TheGentlemensFoundation.org)*

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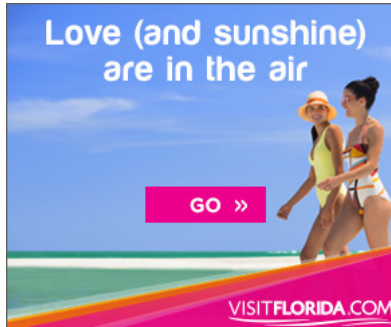
Winnie McCroy is the Women on the EDGE Editor, HIV/Health Editor, and Assistant Entertainment Editor for EDGE Media Network, handling all women's news, HIV health stories and theater reviews throughout the U.S. She has contributed to other publications, including The Village Voice, Gay City News, Chelsea Now and The Advocate, and lives in Brooklyn, New York.

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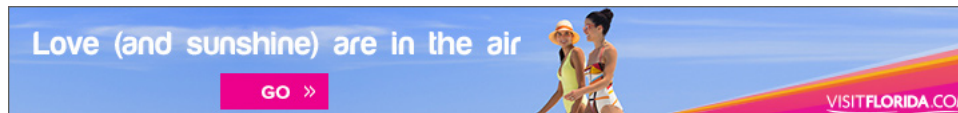
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