

# the Leading Men of 2008

## Cleo Manago The Uniter



THROUGH HIS GROUNDBREAKING WORK IN AND OUT OF THE BLACK GLBT COMMUNITY, HE'S PUTTING THE EMPHASIS ON LOVE AND PROGRESS

Since 1989, Cleo Manago has been at the forefront of the struggle to liberate what he terms SGL ("same-gender-loving") black men from stereotypes and ingrained cultural antagonism and bring them to a place of acceptance and love by the community and for themselves.

To foster this growth and change, Cleo was instrumental in creating the Black Men's Xchange (BMX), a Los Angeles-based group.

"It was important that we finally have healing, empowerment and affirmation opportunities local to where most of us lived," he says. "A part of our social-change strategy was to actively facilitate dialogue within the community about black unity, bisexuality and same-gender-love. Regardless of sexuality, we need to unlearn the symptoms and consequences of internalized oppression."

An underrepresented minority culture within a minority culture, black SGL men face what Manago calls "co-occurring challenges"—abnormally high percentages of single-parent homes and unemployment rates, to name two—which may lead black men to anxiety and insecurity.

BMX invites both SGL and heterosexual black males to transformational spaces in which men can bluntly debate the nature of their identities in the black community—with an eye to bringing about understanding.

"These spaces encourage dialogue in order to transform oppressive or abusive attitudes," he says. "We have been very successful at unpacking the experience, traumas, misinformation or conditioning behind points of view that have led to anti-homosexual and even anti-black behavior in the community."

BMX has allied itself with two of the most visible—and controversial—national leaders in the black community. Minister Louis Farrakhan invited Manago, as an SGL black male, to address the crowds at the 10-year anniversary of the Million Man March, cementing an existing relationship with the Nation of Islam. BMX has also partnered with the Rev. Al Sharpton, who came out against a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage, asking why adultery—which threatens the institution more than gay marriage ever could—was not likewise being banned.

Why, then, with all this high-profile support, does Manago feel it important to use the "SGL" designation instead of folding into the GLBT label?

"SGL was created to provide homosexual and bisexual black people with a way of referencing ourselves that articulated and highlighted 'loving' as our intention," he says. "That we do and can love needs to be noted, especially by us. It often gets lost in the fog of internalized and societal oppression, unsuccessful relationships and more recently the black male HIV/AIDS holocaust. Black people have disproportionately endured epidemics of HIV, self-hate and cultural disruption. This needs to be resolved!" — SEAN McGRATH

LEADING MEN 2008

