

Hip-Hop Rap Community Threats Discussed

Written by Keith ID1510

Thursday, 09 June 2005 05:52 -

Interview with Author and Activist asha bandele

At the beginning of the week we reported on the newest threat to the hip-hop community. Bill H.R. 1528 that is being referred to by many as the “Snitch” bill.

Upon further research I have seen that the threat posed by the “War on Drugs” is a lot bigger than one bill. As asha bandele says, “But I think the biggest problem is the racial disparity. Minorities—African Americans in particular—are the biggest targets of the “war on drugs.” The discussion of race has got to be part of drug policy.”

This interview was done by Teri Weefur, Deputy Web Coordinator for the Drug Policy Alliance. The Alliance is the nation's leading organization working to end the war on drugs. They envision new drug policies based on science, compassion, health and human rights and a just society in which the fears, prejudices and punitive prohibitions of today are no more.

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asha bandele (who writes her name in lower case) is the Deputy Director of Public Policy at the Drug Policy Alliance. □ asha assists Michael Blain, the Director of Public Policy, in organizing coalitions nationwide who work to create meaningful and lasting drug policy reform.

She also coordinates the Advocacy Grants Program for the Alliance. asha is also author of The Prisoner's Wife and Daughter.

Q. You come from a very creative background, having worked at Essence magazine and being an author and a poet. What has led you to working with an organization like the Drug Policy Alliance and how do you think your background and experience can contribute to the mission of drug policy reform?

A. I started my career as an organizer and any organizer needs to find out what role is best for her to play. I see my ability to write as one of the best ways I can contribute to the progressive movement. The challenge at Essence—a publication that reaches some 7 million diverse readers each month—was figuring out how to reach those readers who may not share the same beliefs I have. How do I get them to care about drug policy reform or prisons? I think my experience from Essence will be useful in helping Alliance staff talk to everyone from legislators to funders who may not yet see the value of our work, as well as to the average person who needs to understand that the “war on drugs” is contributing to a less humane, less just society, which we sanction with our tax dollars.

Q. What do you believe is the most flawed aspect of our drug laws?

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A. I think the most obvious point is that we shouldn't be arresting people for what they put in their body, especially marijuana! But I think the biggest problem is the racial disparity. Minorities—African Americans in particular—are the biggest targets of the “war on drugs.” The discussion of race has got to be part of drug policy. If you're not talking about race at just about every juncture, then you're not talking about the drug war as it's construed in this nation.

Q. In the short time you've been at the Alliance, how, if any, has your thinking on drug policy changed?

A. When I started talking to a young, white Marine who was losing his sight to glaucoma and who needed to use medical marijuana, he made me think about the people I wouldn't necessarily have considered before. I used to only think of the drug war through the lens of the Rockefeller Drug Laws, but learning that Marine's story makes me realize how much more complex it all is.

Q. What do you think is the most effective way to divert young African Americans from entering the criminal justice system?

A. We have to understand that as long as young black men are viewed as criminals, nothing will change. And if there is a legislative scheme—stated or unstated—to expand the prison system, then there's nothing any one program is going to do. But we also know that when there are programs, mentors, community involvement and community empowerment vis à vis, after

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school programs, sports, and the arts, young people feel like they have something to live for and they choose to live. That is the magic bullet. There needs to be a full investment in the community, from a grassroots level upwards. I'm talking about nutrition, exercise, and true community involvement. It's when young people have that support that we see them making the right choices. It takes hard work, commitment and money, but it's less work than it takes to build and maintain a prison community.

Q. Which systems should be in place to best reintegrate former prisoners back into society?

A. The first step is dismantling what's already in place. People can't be shut out of housing, jobs and society or be told they can't vote. Those barriers have to first be removed. If you walk out of prison and don't feel like part of society, you won't participate in it. It's like being invited to a party but told you have to stay in the foyer. You're never going to feel welcome. I wish prisoners coming home had counseling by people trained to deal with folks who were in some of the worst confinements. I wish they had job training. With all the 25 to lifers we have now, we'll have an entire generation being released with virtually no job training and with marginalized social skills. They need someone beyond the parole officer who will walk them through all the changes. Bureaucracy complicates everything, even for those of us who consider ourselves professionals, so imagine the confusion an ex-felon feels when just trying to get a driver's license.

Q. Which politician, activist or celebrity do you most admire in their community involvement efforts?

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A. I admire a lot of people for many different reasons and for the various roles they've played. I admire everyone from Malcolm X to Paul Robeson. I admire Assata Shakur [exiled Black Panther activist], as well as Charles Barron, and rappers Mos Def and Common for their support of her. I admire Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth for what they did. I admire Dorothy Allison for the truth that she tells and the stories she writes, and Audre Lorde, who was my mentor. These are people who stand up and tell the truth and do it with the courage that it takes, and when it's not the "expedient thing" as Martin Luther King, Jr. said. At the end of the day, we are all a collective, a team that crosses race and national boundaries trying to make the world livable.

Q. How do you rank the importance of drug policy reform in relation to other current domestic issues?

A. I don't like to rank things because I think it keeps people from uniting and causes division. Is drug policy reform more important than environmentalism or any other issue for that matter? The "war on drugs" is as wrong as the war in Iraq, as wrong as homelessness.

We need to look at where we are and see all the things that are wrong, and then specialize in the things we're best at to contribute to the greater good.

Q. As a journalist, do you feel the media is living up to its responsibility in shaping our awareness on matters of importance?

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A. The media plays a huge role in shaping our awareness. The media informs us—broadcast media specifically—telling us what to wear and how to think. We believe much of what they say, but the media is not living up to its responsibility of telling the truth. Too many journalists are kowtowing to the government for no other reason than to maintain their access to people in positions of power—and thus to maintain their ratings and their salaries. The media is more responsive to profit sharing and profit making than to the ideal that “people have a right to know” and it’s very frustrating.

Q. How do you think your community involvement has affected young people who could relate to you?

A. When I get the opportunity to talk to young people, I hope they can look in the mirror and see what I see in them. I hope that they know that I see whole human beings with the right to be heard, to be on this planet and to be afforded the opportunity to be what they want to in this world.

Q. What motivated you to go into organizing and what inspires you today?

A. I remember going to my first protest to legalize marijuana when I was 14 years old. I also remember participating in school protests for budget cuts. I knew my family could afford to send me to school but I chose to stand with others who couldn’t because I believed in access to a higher education for all. I’ve always felt that it’s important to stand on the right side of history.

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When people look back on our time, I don't want to be one of those people who did nothing.

Q. As a mother, what kind of advice are you or will you be giving your daughter, as it relates to drugs in America and how we deal with them?

A. As a mother, every minute of every day I am a role model to a girl who this nation does not believe in. I always have to model for her by taking the positions that are going to serve her and other children. I try to tell my daughter the truth. I tell her that no one has died from smoking weed, and that people die of alcohol everyday. And when she sees me having a glass of wine, I don't pretend that drinking wine is as good as drinking water. I hope that when she's of age, she doesn't need to choose something that will not let her be present in her life. Because that's why I think people abuse drugs—to escape something. I hope that she'd never have a reason to “check out” from her life because I am raising her to love and honor her life.