

Maxwell Ayamba, co-founder of 100 Black Men Walk for Health, talks to author *Derek Owusu* about the importance of working with black and ethnic minority communities to reconnect them with nature.

# Black Men Walking

When I arrive in Sheffield to meet Ghanaian journalist Maxwell Ayamba – co-founder of 100 Black Men Walk for Health and inspiration behind the stage play, *Black Men Walking* – I'm unbearably cold. By the time we meet at Victoria Quays, I'm rubbing my hands together and sliding my palms up and down my jeans to keep warm.

"It's not about the weather," Maxwell tells me, "it's about how you're dressed." He is wearing thermals, fleece, thick jeans and hiking boots. "I collect the outdoor gear from a charity called GiftYourGear and Rohan to give to BAME groups and some of the people who walk with us. You have to be wearing the right clothes because of the exposure to different weather and we will sometimes be walking for miles."

"Today, I don't have my walking poles," he jokes, as we set out along the Sheffield & Tinsley Canal. The reason for the cold, I learn after a 10-minute walk – during which Maxwell points out historic monuments, proudly declares another building Sheffield's oldest pub and explains that the city derives its name from the River Sheaf and is said to be built on seven hills – is that we are close to water; this seems to be a commonly known axiom among people in the city.

But soon I forget the weather and the only thing that touches me is the silence and a sense of calm that descends as we walk and talk. I notice the scattered houseboats and how the water seem to freshen the air rather than cool it. Maxwell says hello to every walker we pass, mentioning how friendly Sheffield is.

I ask him how 100 Black Men Walk for Health came to life. "In 2004, two of my Afro-Caribbean friends approached me and said, 'Can we set up something for black men to talk – for their wellbeing?' To walk and talk, that's all it was. I said cool because I liked walking. Plus, I had high blood pressure at the time. So we planned to walk the first Saturday of each month."

Wellbeing to Maxwell means physical and mental health. Both are equally important to the walking group: "As black people, we are susceptible to lots of different diseases. Our risk of Type 2 diabetes is three times that of white people; we develop high blood pressure earlier in life; and our stroke risk is twice as high. And when you look at mental health, black patients

are four times as likely to be sectioned under the Mental Health Act as white people. We had to do something about it."

Maxwell's concerns about black men's mental health is shared by CALM, a mental health charity that says black men are far more likely to be diagnosed with severe mental health problems – a statement that echoes my own experience being diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder in 2018.

"When we walk," Maxwell continues, "it gives us the chance to talk and share. Men don't really like talking but walking is an opportunity to open up. They know we don't judge so people feel comfortable sharing what they're going through. Traditionally, in the West, the only place black men converge and talk are the barbershops, but we want open spaces where we have fresh air to promote physical health and mental wellbeing."

The social aspect of the walks, Maxwell makes clear, cannot be overstated. Many bonds and relationships are developed. Not only that, similar initiatives have begun to pop up all over the UK. "The play, *Black Men Walking*, you know that was about us?" he says, referring to the sold-out theatre show following the story of a group of men walking in the Peak District, which the *Guardian* describes as a "hilly walk through 500 years of black British history".

"After the play was performed in London, people started joining us. Some travelled far to walk with us." Maxwell also travels to meet these new groups and joins them on their journeys.

Before I head back, Maxwell insists I follow him up steps to a grassy area called the amphitheatre that overlooks the city centre. Reaching the top, I ask for a few seconds to catch my breath. Maxwell, invigorated, asks me if I can guess how old he is. I get the point. We stand together looking over Sheffield. He points into the distance. "Look. The next time you come, we'll go there, where the air is even fresher. That's where we normally walk." ★

*Maxwell's group is now called walk4health and is open to everyone; semcharity.org.uk. You can read more from Derek Owusu in Safe: On Black British Men Reclaiming Space (2019) and his debut novel That Reminds Me (2019).*



Maxwell Ayamba, left, and Derek Owusu at Victoria Quays, Sheffield. Photography by Paul Moffat.