BACKGROUND

- In 1992, African American women involved in the founding of the Cultural Wellness Center began an examination process into the high rates of preterm birth, low birth-weight and infant mortality among US born black women.

WHAT THEY FOUND

- Was a sense of cultural pain was living inside of their bodies – a sense that the sacredness of their womanhood had been violated – the sacred part of their womanhood that carries their culture forward.
What They Concluded

- Was that solutions to high rates of preterm birth were only going to come as they began doing their own intellectual work and defining and describing health outcomes affecting black women using a framework, language, and terms created by them.

What Came Next: The People’s Theory

Loss of culture and community creates a downward spiraling process that results in sickness, disease, and community decay.

The People’s Theory and Historical Trauma

Frame:

How we think about ourselves determines how we think about creating solutions to our problems.
For African Americans, the concept of history and the idea of an identity framed within history, which is the historical identity, are traumatic; the identification with history ties us to an identity of enslavement, which was the awful terror and 400 year trauma we experienced – utter cultural erasure.

History teaches us that we were once enslaved, but it does not teach us that we are an indigenous people with an indigenous way of knowing.

The People’s Theory was created in 1994, and though research now shows that the process of acculturation and de-culturation are traumatic, particularly to newly arrived immigrants and Native peoples, we have found that within the literature on this topic, which highlights the effects of acculturative stress, the experience of African American people is seldom included or studied from the perspective of cultural loss; one underlying assumption being that we gained culture rather than having lost it, the other being that our identity begins with our arrival on North American shores.
African Americans and Acculturation: A Field of Study

- In 2003, one of our culturally-engaged scholars wrote a master’s thesis on cultural uprootedness as the cause of infant mortality among black women.
- Through her review of the literature and synthesis of available data she was able to demonstrate that the precepts of the People’s Theory were legitimate, accurate and concrete.
- Through her studies at the Center, she was able to advance a solution to the high rates of infant mortality and preterm birth among black women; her research was not only about locating a problem; it was about advancing and supporting a culturally-based solution.

The Intellectual Product and Solution: The Birthing Team

- Is based on the African system of knowledge and worldview which teaches that “African womanhood is sacred,” and that “People are not born human, they become human in community.”
- Consists of kinship networks, elders, other mothers and sisterhood circles to support women from conception to birth.

CWC Birthing Team Data

- 29 births between 2010-2011
- Eight visits per mom
- Fewer than 5% were married
- Average BW 7.3 pounds
- No preterm births, no infant deaths
- Four cesarean sections (> 1%)
- Five took pain medication (> 1%)
Culturally-Engaged Scholarship & Its Contributions to Academic Research

While we have several examples of how culturally-engaged scholarship at the Center can and has contributed to the study of acculturation and de-culturation, we would like to emphasize the importance of having cultural communities do their own intellectual work, test their own theories and hypotheses, and produce knowledge that results in truly effective programs and approaches – programs and approaches which represent their unique cultural way of knowing and being.

The Cultural Wellness frame for changing behavior which leads to disease

The Disease:
- Individualism, loss of culture and community
- Intellectual Poverty and Helplessness
- Infant Mortality, Premature Birth & Out of Home Placement
- Diabetes, Heart Disease, STD & Chronic Conditions
- Physical Poverty & Government Dependency
- Homicide & Suicide
- Years of Potential Life Lost

“If I talk about my baby’s death instead of my baby’s life, my child cannot rest, my child’s spirit would be suspended.”

“I want my child to rest in peace.”

“My 15 year old daughter was shot down. Her body was not returned to me for two days. She had to lay in that cold morgue, unnamed and unidentified like an animal. She was not what she appeared to be in the newspaper story of her death, which read ‘another black woman murdered’. She was a child whose innocence was stolen from her by life on the street. I tried! Oh God I tried to get help! They told me at the County that until she was hurt they couldn’t help me. They could not help with prevention. I only wanted them to diagnose her behavior; her erratic behavior so I could access health care services. Now I am left to live with the memory. I can hardly eat, hardly sleep, I can’t work or take care of my other children. I feel hopeless. Life is not worth it.”
The People’s Theory: A symbolic, spiritual definition of sickness and disease

The People’s Theory of Sickness is a symbolic statement that summarizes and explains the current indices used in public health to describe patterns of disease.
Scale of Engagement™

Each visit is counted as a step toward improved well-being.

- Participant is isolated, alone; disconnected; in personal, medical or social crisis
- Expresses a sense of paralysis
- Overwhelmed, deeply afraid
- Participant begins to accept responsibility for condition
- Recognizes path to change
- Agreeable to the spirit of living
- Is able to name the problem
- Participant is able to accept the teaching that the physical symptom brings
- Understands the sickness
- Manages the symptom
- Expresses knowledge of solutions
- Participant has a voice
- Participant is fulfilling group
- Supporting ceremonies
- Leadership abilities:
  - Serving Others
  - Citizen Health Action Teams
  - Giving Back

Philosophies of Knowledge

Community as "Container"
- Organic knowing
- Experiences
- Customs
- Traditions
- Rituals, Ceremonies

Institution as "Container"
- Mainstream/
  - Popularized
- Conventional
- Modern/New
- Fixed

Points of Intersection:
- Love of learning
- Produces values, vision and living together

Differences Cited:
- Measures of Sources and Credibility
- Certification for Leadership
- Sources for Knowledge Creation
- Living for earned respect (an honor vs. entitlement)

Dimensions of Time Informs Through Memories, Family Systems

Transformation Occurs

Cultures seeking to understand how to fulfill human obligation to a Cosmic Intelligence and to remain consistent with the Sacred

- When Experiences Exceed or Exceedingly
- False Wholeness

- True Wholeness
- And Truth

- Transformation
- And Earned

- Listening to the Cosmic

- Discovery

- Guided by Cultural Elders

- Cultures

- Understanding and Commitment

- Relationships

- Knowledge and Commitment

- Cultures

- Listening to the Cosmic

- Discovery

- Guided by Cultural Elders

- Cultures
The Mirror

The mirrors, door, wall, dresser, bureau, Hand-held mirror, The compact mirror in your cosmetic case, The rearview mirror in the car, The eyes of the person looking back at you...

In my mind, behind my eyes, Inside my face, resound these words. Still heard and listened for, Over the phases and stages of life.

Think... Write... Be strengthened.

As an Elder, teaching in the tradition of The ancestors of ancient Africa, I humbly submit to be guided By those who come after me. May the ancestors be pleased.

- Elder Atum Arzzahir, 1999

Some Definition of Terms

- **Self-Study** – studying personal thoughts, attitudes and behavior through the purview of culture. Self-study is about learning from inside about knowledge, thoughts, concepts, worth, and value as relates to a higher cosmic self.

- **Transformation** – the process of spiritual maturation from one phase of being to another; the process of becoming self-mastered, self-directed and self-governed, interdependent with a higher and collective self.

Some Definition of Terms

- **Institutions** - are societal structures which maintain social order and cooperation. They are mechanisms for governing the behavior of individuals. Institutions are identified with a social purpose detached from individual human lives, but that makes and enforces the set rules governing human behavior. The term is commonly applied to customs and behavior patterns, as well as to particular formal organizations of government and public service.
Some Definition of Terms

• **Partnership** – in the case of community–institution partnerships, a partnership is a committed relationship created to share and exchange knowledge, teach each other how to solve problems, share authority, work as a team and together close the door on cultural disrespect, arrogance, paternalism and exclusively individualistic perspective on human behavior.

Some Definition of Terms

• **Listening** - The ability to listen with both our ears and our hearts; the ability to listen underneath the words. To listen with an open mind towards intentional understanding, listening for background, peoplehood, hidden knowledge, meaning, value and measure.

• **Negotiation** – the process of sharing of intellectual authority in the production of knowledge. I know and you know, you do not need to represent what I know.

• **Sacred** – the hidden and life force guiding action. The natural rhythms and harmony of a peoplehood which sustains over time, creates limits, elevates and inspires reach.

Some Definition of Terms

• **Advocacy** – positioning, strategizing and valuing the details of personal, familial, communal or cultural experiences.

• **Cultural Intelligence** – Knowing the ways of your people and being competent and proficient in culturally sustainable actions within and across cultural customs, beliefs and mores.

• **Culture** – Consists of practices that people create to give themselves continuity and cohesion across generations. Culture consists of a set of highly patterned, unspoken implicit rules, behaviors and thoughts which control everything that [we] do. [A people, peoplehood is at the core of culture.]