

## Leading with Lived Experience: A Conversation with Brianna about Culturally Responsive Arts-Based Research

**The best public health research doesn't just study communities—it's led by them.**

Brianna Smith, Program Manager at Performance Hypothesis and Project Co-Director for [the Equitable Vaccines initiative](#), brings lived experience that is often missing from public health leadership. As an African American woman with deep roots in the communities this research serves, Brianna's approach is grounded in empathy, authenticity, and a commitment to dismantling the structural inequities that shape health outcomes.

With the new Robert Wood Johnson Foundation [grant in hand with Out of Hand Theater](#), Brianna is co-leading a research project that uses arts-based engagement to address vaccine hesitancy and healthcare access barriers in Metro Atlanta's Black and Hispanic communities.

We sat down with her to learn more about her vision for the work ahead.

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### **What experiences—academic or lived—shaped your commitment to racial and Indigenous health equity work?**

As an African American woman, growing up as part of a community that has historically faced systemic barriers, I have a genuine understanding how it feels to be impacted by structural inequities. These lived experiences shaped my commitment to dismantling health disparities and uplifting marginalized voices in my work.

My personal perspective, along with my academic training and professional practice, enables me to design programs and evaluations that are not only culturally responsive but also rooted in empathy, authenticity, and community empowerment.

**Why the arts? How have you seen creative approaches succeed where traditional public health methods fall short in addressing health topics?**

I had the privilege of growing up immersed in the arts—I was a dancer for 15 years and played the trumpet in my school’s symphonic band for several years. I’ve experienced firsthand the power of the arts and in my current role at Performance Hypothesis, I am able to explore the connections between the arts and health even further through research and evaluation. So, I know that we can rely on creative approaches to build trust, inspire dialogue, make health information more accessible than traditional methods alone, and encourage healthy behaviors. It’s exciting to be part of advancing the arts as a meaningful tool in public health.

**How does your approach to evaluation embody antiracist or anticolonial principles? Can you share a specific example?**

My approach to evaluation is grounded in intentionally shifting power. I ensure that community input shapes the program design, evaluation processes, and the dissemination of findings. By doing this, I aim to uplift the voices, knowledge, and priorities of communities most impacted by inequities. This approach guided our work on the Equitable Vaccines project and, I believe was vital to the program’s positive impact.

**What's one of your proudest achievements in this work?**

One of my proudest achievements was publishing our evaluation of [the Equitable Vaccines program in the \*Journal of Qualitative Health Research\*](#). It was such a joy to contribute to the field and highlight the importance of Culturally Responsive and Equitable evaluation methods.

**How do you navigate power dynamics when partnering with historically marginalized communities? What does authentic collaboration look like in practice?**

I believe it’s imperative to intentionally uplift the perspectives of our partners, especially those from historically marginalized communities. In practice, this means creating space for community partners to share their insights and ensuring their input meaningfully shapes program design and evaluation. Authentic collaboration requires shared decision-making, transparency, and commitment to valuing community expertise.

*Brianna Smith has worked at the intersection of arts and health for 4 years. She brings expertise in strategic planning, implementation, and program evaluation. Her passion for the field of arts and health stems from her background as a competitive dancer for more than a decade and trumpet player. Brianna holds a Master of Public Health from Emory University.*



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