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Changing Perceptions; Changing Lives

**The Black Male Identity Project Uses Community Art
To Change the Way We Think
About What it Means to be a Black Male**

What:	Community arts organization Art on Purpose launches the “Black Male Identity Project,” a community-driven effort of workshops, performances, celebrations and exhibitions designed to reverse the tide of negative ideas, imagery and narratives about black men. Dynamic speakers at the launch include Rep. Elijah E. Cummings (D-Md.); Diane Bell McKoy , executive director, Associated Black Charities; Rashid Shabazz , program officer, Campaign for Black Male Achievement, Open Society Foundations; Joseph T. Jones, Jr. , founder, president and CEO, Center of Urban Families and Diana Morris , director, Open Society Institute-Baltimore; among many others.
When:	10:30 a.m., Thursday, March 24
Where:	Arch Social Club 2426 Pennsylvania Avenue Baltimore, MD

Editors Note: Speakers and participants will be available for interviews and appearances before and after the press conference. Please call Debra Rubino, 410-340-0562 for information.

BALTIMORE – Black men are criminals. Black men are uneducated. Black men are drug dealers. Black men are basketball players. Black men are absentee fathers. Black men are scary.

These are some of the negative – and in many cases, untrue – perceptions that surround black men in America. And in Baltimore, a city where 65% of the population is African American, the majority of its men are unfairly judged by those perceptions.

The Black Male Identity Project, a groundbreaking and provocative community-driven effort of workshops, performances, celebrations and exhibitions, is designed to combat the prevailing negative image of black men, by allowing the members of that group – and those who love and understand them – to redefine what it means to be black and male.

“This project is so important because the story of black men has been told by so many others and it’s been misinterpreted,” says Sam Holmes, one of the project’s co-directors. “We need to tell our own story in a language that we *understand*.”

Says the project’s co-director Fanon Hill: “This is a really provocative issue that people in Baltimore have danced around for too long.”

On Mar. 24, Art on Purpose, a local community arts organization, will officially launch the project, taking the sensitive issue head-on with a thought-provoking panel of speakers, including U.S. Rep Elijah E. Cummings (D-Md.)

The event will be held at the Arch Social Club, the oldest known continuously operating African-American social club in the United States. Founded in 1912 “for the social, moral, and intellectual uplift of its members,” it has been the center of social activities for its members and the surrounding community for nearly 100 years and is the perfect setting for the Black Male Identity Project to be launched.

The project aims to stimulate a community-wide dialogue that will in part begin with a website, www.morethan28days.com, which will be unveiled and go live at the press conference. Through the website, the public will be invited to engage in online conversation, see images and read stories about black male identity and share authentic, positive images and stories around this subject. The website includes resources for educators who wish to engage in the project and information on multiple ways for artists and the public to participate.

Through workshops, performances, celebrations and exhibitions, this discussion will grow over the course of a year in Baltimore. (*See timeline and schedule of events, attached.*)

The project is funded in large part by the Open Society Foundation’s Campaign for Black Male Achievement (CBMA). In addition, it is funded by the Maryland State Arts Council, the Maryland Humanities Council and the Cohen Opportunity Fund at The Associated.

The project is led by an Advisory Group, formed in September 2010, composed of more than 40 individuals with deep roots in a variety of community settings—faith-based, cultural, social service, youth development, media, educational, civil service, and philanthropic communities. (*See attached list.*)

Youth Provocateurs, a team of high-school and college aged young adults, will use the performing arts to as a street organizing and grassroots outreach arm of the project, attending community meetings throughout Baltimore and making presentations as requested by schools, non-profit organizations and other groups.

At the end of the project’s year, participants will have built a repository of images that counter the prevailing narrative. The goal is to provide that repository as a free tool to all, in an effort to change perceptions, relationships and, ultimately, lives.

“We all know that perceptions matter,” says Diane Bell McKoy, executive director of Associated Black Charities, whose perspective as a black woman is compellingly germane to this conversation.

“The question is can we change people’s perceptions? And can we change the outcomes for black men if we change the perception?”

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Art on Purpose, a 501 3c operating in Baltimore, enriches, inspires, and informs Baltimore communities by using, making, and sharing art to bring people together around issues that matter to them.