



Black Infant Mortality Awareness Walk:

Origin Story

In 2014, as a protest against indifference, I decided to take a walk. The walk was born out of frustration. Frustration that Black maternal and infant fatalities were on the rise and that nothing much was being done about it. It has long been known that Black babies die at twice the rate of white infants and that Black mothers are 3-5 times more likely to die during the childbearing year over their white counterparts. Decades have passed and nothing of real substance has been done to shift these statistics. In fact, the death rates have been on the rise. To fight back against this indifference, I decided to walk- across my home state of Missouri. I chose the Katy Trail- a converted railroad track that had become a hiking/biking trail that ran straight across the midsection of Missouri roughly between Kansas City and St. Louis. I worked for a year to prepare for the walk, assembling a team, raising funds, creating a walking schedule, finding hosts along the trail, setting up speaking engagements and interviews. It was a huge undertaking.

Looking back at it now, I can absolutely say it was one of the best experiences of my life. I spent days on the trail- alone. My team would drop me off at the trail head in the morning and I'd meet them at the end of 8 hours of walking in a town several miles away. I walked alone and in solitude, as our mothers often do in their times of travail, or as our babies often do in their solitary NICU journeys, that they often don't make it out of. I had hours of solitary walking in the most beautiful pastoral surroundings. The Katy Trail cuts a wide swath across rural Missouri farmland, often shrouded by shade trees on either side with wide furrowed fields just beyond it. Sometimes I encountered bikers or hikers or even families on an evening or afternoon stroll, but mostly, I walked alone and in silence. I documented my journey in social media, posting hourly on my progress. Along the way I was hosted by Missouri families, interviewed in small towns by waiting reporters, and invited to speak in university halls. I was loved on and cared for throughout the weeklong walk. It was supposed to take two weeks to cross the trail but half way across, in our state capital, Jefferson City, we were involved in a hit and run accident. Our RV was totaled but thankfully, no one was hurt. The walk had to be abandoned without our support vehicle, but we had met many objectives of the walk, raising awareness and money and building our own resolve to continue to fight the good fight.

Today, the annual walks have continued. We now walk a much-shortened walk of 3 miles from local hospitals to Uzazi Village. We invite others in their own cities to do the same. We want awareness of the issue of Black infant mortality and perinatal health inequity to continue to



grow. We want to continue to raise funds to combat the problem. We want policy and legislation to reflect this issue as a priority.

To that end, we invite you to join us. Wherever you are, you can order T-shirts, signage, playlist and press kits to put together a walk in your area. Join us on **September 18, 2021** (and every third Saturday in September) to send a message to healthcare providers, law makers and policy makers, and our communities as a whole that the survival of Black babies is an issue that impacts us all. Black babies are dying from largely preventable causes (complications from prematurity) and it does not have to be this way. We invite the participation of local hospitals, clinics, social service agencies and health departments to walk with us and engage the conversation and enact real solutions. Those solutions should begin with community partnership through a lens of antiracism. Those most impacted should lead the way. We invite all communities to join us in posting videos and photos of your local walk on our Facebook page on September 18th.

We want to know what's happening in your location around infant mortality. What strategies are you using to save our precious Black babies? Share with us around the country and together we can learn from one another. Thank you for being a part of the eighth annual Black Infant Mortality Awareness Walk.

~Hakima Payne, CEO, Uzazi Village