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Check It: This LGBT Gang Fought Hate With Fists Until They Found Fashion And Film

"Find a different way because fighting is not the right way," says one of the gang's former leaders.

by **mtv news staff** 3/12/2015

By *Channing Joseph*

Hiding his sexuality was never an option for Travon Warren, even when he was very young.

"My mom knew it first," Tray, 23, told MTV News. "She said, 'I knew from the day I held you.'"

But growing up black and openly gay in some of the roughest and poorest sections of Washington, D.C., was difficult — to say the least. Tray was constantly bullied, and had no one turn to for help. He also saw how other gay kids were treated: some were beaten, stabbed, and even shot.

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One particular incident still stands out in his memory. Back in the fifth grade, Tray got into a fight with another boy who had been picking on him at school. Pretty quickly, the boy ran home, and the conflict seemed to be over. Sadly, it wasn't.



Tray/Holden Warren/Check It

"He came back to the school, and he had a gun with him," Tray said. "It was very scary. You never know. I could have lost my life that day."

The other boy eventually backed down, but the moment was a turning point in Tray's life.

Remembering that incident and many others like it, Tray and about 15 of his closest friends banded together to form Check It, which is believed to be the nation's only exclusively gay, lesbian, and transgender street gang. For its members, many of whom have been disowned because of their sexuality or gender identity, Check It has become their only family.

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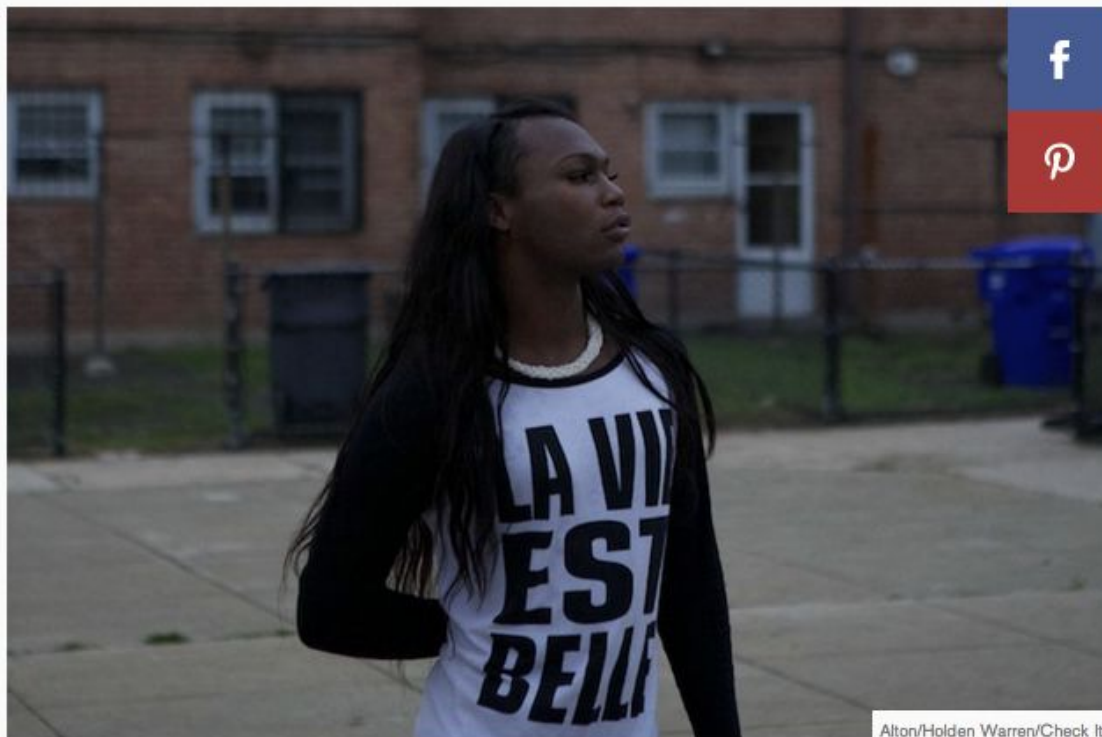
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Over the last 10 years, as the gang's membership has grown into the hundreds, it has also developed a reputation in Washington for intimidating bullies and violently beating back homophobic attacks by individuals and other gangs — with fists, brass knuckles, and knives. In the process, many members — who range in age from about 12 to 22 — have landed in jail, including Tray, who has served time and been on probation for minor crimes.

An upcoming documentary, titled simply "**Check It**," will follow Tray and three other gang members — Alton, Day Day, and Skittles — as they work to escape their lives of poverty, violence, and petty crime by starting a fashion line, and eventually attending New York Fashion Week.

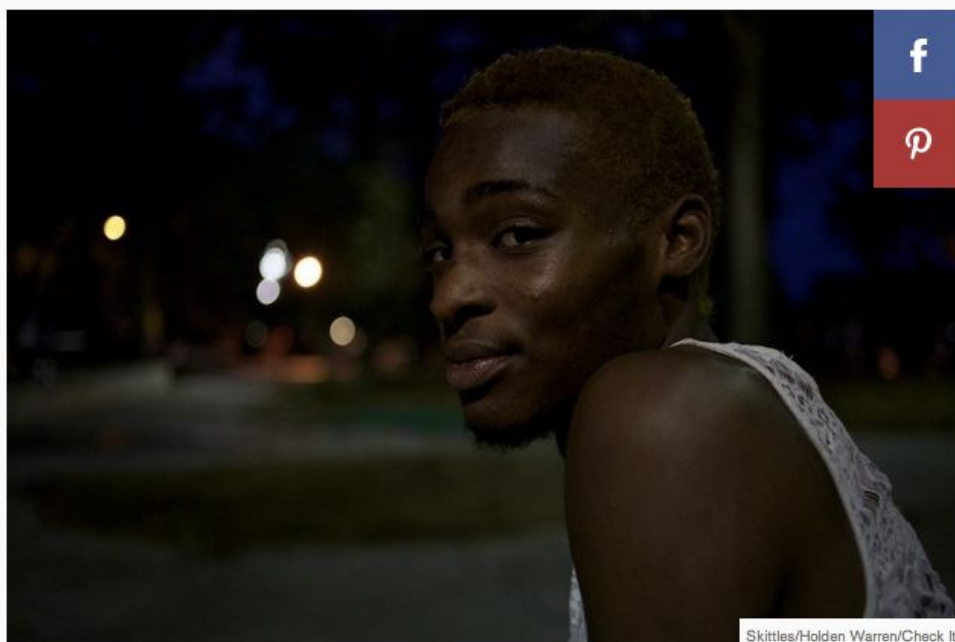


The film is being co-produced by "Boardwalk Empire" star Steve Buscemi and others, and is being directed by the film-making team of Dana Flor and Toby Oppenheimer, who learned about the gang when a local resident asked them if they were interested in meeting some young gay youth who were putting on fashion shows. They were both floored by the strength and creativity they saw in these young people and knew that a movie about them had to be made.



But Flor and Oppenheimer haven't quite finished the "Check It" film yet. In order to do that, they need more money, so they're trying to raise \$60,000 through an online campaign. Ten percent of what they raise will be given directly to kids in the film, to pay for fabric and sewing machines to help them get their fashion line off the ground.

As of the publication of this article, **the campaign had raised \$25,790 with just 24 more days to go**. If they reach their goal, Flor and Oppenheimer are hoping the documentary can premiere at film festivals this fall or in early 2016.



Ron Moten, a community activist, has been working with Check It members since 2008.

Though straight, he relates to them because he was once a troubled youth who spent years in prison on drug charges. Now a free man, he has devoted his life to mentoring young people and recently helped Check It members show and sell their clothing at a local church.

"It's more than a fashion show. It's part of their healing," he said.



And there are a lot of wounds to heal. The traumas and challenges that many Check It members have faced are staggering, and they include homelessness and hunger. Some members may eat nothing more than “a bag of Doritos a day,” Flor told MTV.

“So many of their mothers have been lost to drugs,” she continued. “So many of them don’t know their fathers. So many of them have learning disabilities. Many, many have been sexually and physically abused. ... At the same time, they are so talented and so resilient. They have amazing spirits and they’re survivors. They have the bravery to be who they are because being a homosexual dressed in lipstick and high heels in Washington, D.C., takes bravery.”

And when it comes to the idea that gay people are weak and unable to defend themselves, “the film flips every stereotype,” Oppenheimer added.



In fact, the gang’s toughness has become legendary, particularly since the go-go band ReAction gave shout-outs to several Check It members, including Tray, in the song “Coffee Shop,” lending the group a huge amount of street cred in the nation’s capital.

“When that song was done, it was all over the place,” Tray said. “Even when we’d be out at stores, people were singing it. In D.C. we got really famous off that song.”





Now that they've grown up, though, Tray and the other Check It leaders are ready to put violence behind them. In fact, Tray has left the gang entirely. Recently he completed Job Corps training, and he is planning to attend college soon and to study either acting or law enforcement. He also mentors other youth facing the same kind of challenges he once did.

His advice is: "Find a different way because fighting is not the right way."

Tray is also hopeful that the film can help provide a positive message for gay and trans kids.

"I just want it touch people's lives," he said. "I want it to show people that you can be yourself."



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