

IDEAS AT FORD WITH CHARLES BLOW

The Courage Fund with Stephanie “Sparkle” Edwards and Aishah Shahidah Simmons

In this “Ideas at Ford” conversation, The Courage Fund’s inaugural awardees, Stephanie “Sparkle” Edwards and Aishah Shahidah Simmons, join host Charles Blow to discuss standing up in the face of adversity for the benefit of women and girls everywhere.

The Courage Fund is an initiative led by bestselling author Ta-Nehisi Coates and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Salamishah Tillet and artist Scheherazade Tillet of *A Long Walk Home*, along with activist Ted Bunch of *A Call to Men*. It works to empower women and girls to speak out against violence.

ANNOUNCER: We're pleased now to welcome Charles Blow to the stage.

[applause]

[Charles Blow, a Black man with a gray beard wearing a black suit, Host]

CHARLES BLOW: Hello, and welcome to “Ideas Ford with Charles Blow.” What we do is try to bring together some of the smartest and bravest activists and thinkers to offer ideas for solving some of the world’s biggest problems. Today, we’re here to talk about the work of the Courage Fund, and I am honored to be joined on stage by two extraordinary women who do work around ending sexual violence against women and girls, especially in the Black community.

Platinum recording artist and activist Stephanie “Sparkle” Edwards, and artist, filmmaker and activist Aishah Shahidah Simmons. Thank you both very much for being here. Tonight, you were both given awards by the Courage Fund. Congratulations. Talk to us about the Courage Fund and the work that you’ve been doing. I’ll start with you, Sparkle.

[Stephanie “Sparkle” Edwards, a Black woman with brown eyes and curly, brown golden brown trestles, Platinum Recording Artist and Activist]

STEPHANIE “SPARKLE” EDWARDS: Oh, wow. So, um, just being the inaugural to get the fund is just a blessing. But the Courage Fund means that they see you, that they notice your work and what you’re doing and the work that you’ve put in, and the long hours, the struggle, the tears. It just means strength, you know, in the time of dark spaces for me. It is uplifting and it’s an honor. Yeah, that’s—

[Aishah Shahidah Simmons, an African American woman with brown skin and dreadlocks wearing a maroon shawl and jewelry. Artist, Filmmaker, and Activist]

AISHAH SHAHIDAH SIMMONS: Wow, just echoing—ditto everything that Sparkle shared. For me—one of the things that I shared on when I first received the news—and it was a complete shock because I didn't even know—was just there's something very profound when you are recognized by your own. And so there's the “own” in terms of the community, all of the founders—Salamishah, Scheherazade, Tony, Ted, Ta-Nehisi, and Kamilah—they're all folks of African descent. I've had the, just, the great joy of knowing and loving Salamishah and Scheherazade and then also knowing the incredible work of Ted and Tony over the years and then from afar admiring Ta-Nehisi and Kamilah Forbes. So I think—and all of them are trailblazers and exemplify courage. So when you are recognized by your peers who are doing that work, it is very profound, and especially around a topic that is so taboo even still today. And really amplifying the work of breaking silences about violence committed against Black women and girls.

CHARLES BLOW: Sparkle, it's been years since you testified against R. Kelly, and that case involved an incident with your own niece, who I believe was 14 years old at the time. What did it mean for you to come forward and how did the public but also the music industry itself, respond to you coming forward?

STEPHANIE “SPARKLE” EDWARDS: It took a second for me to come forward. You know, when I heard of even a rumor, like the piece was saying that, I went immediately and called DCFS just to try to get them to go out to investigate. And then when I was shown the tape, and that came about and there was proof that there was something happening, I went guns a' blazing—like, I didn't think about career. I didn't think about the backlash that would come. I just reacted immediately. And I guess me growing up on the west side of Chicago and being the youngest of six and brothers maybe kicking me around sometimes, I learned how to fight. So the exterior is small, but I have a mighty blow, you know what I'm saying?

[applause]

So—I just—I just knew what I was kind of raised to do, and that was to fight for my own, to fight for the family. And that's what I did. And without hesitation, without regret, without feeling guilty or ashamed about anything, I—I did it.

CHARLES BLOW: And what was the response from them?

STEPHANIE “SPARKLE” EDWARDS: The response from the public and from my peers? You hear that?

[silence followed by laughter]

Crickets. Like, nobody had my back. And with my family as tight as we were, I would never have thought this would happen to us or anything like this. I thought they would be like, behind me, beside me, “Girl, get out the way. I'm in front of you”—like nobody. There was one brother, my brother, who stood with me, and love him to death, and I thank him for that daily. But the—my

peers, like the silence was ohh the silence was heavy. Because I have friends—I thought I had friends—in the business, and I do have a few, but none of them came to my rescue, so to speak. And I didn't look for them to come to my rescue because it was mine to fight. But I still would have loved for somebody to be like, “Girl, grab your hand, I'm going with you on this.” Nobody came to that. But in that still, I feel like because nobody came to my rescue, because maybe they were, of course, nonbelievers, or some of the guys—let me just speak for the guys. Maybe some of the guys have dealt with something like this as well. So they would never want to come forward and, you know, hold my hand or have my back because maybe theirs is coming up next. And also, just my sisters, like they were coming at me left and right, left and right. And I was like, “Wow, I thought y'all would see what was going on.” You always see the play and, you know, react as I would, be enraged by it. But, you know, God held my hand and I'm here today, thankful, with right mind, thank God. Yeah.

[applause]

CHARLES BLOW: Aishah, let's stay on that response.

AISHAH SHAHIDAH SIMMONS: Okay.

CHARLES BLOW: Or non-response. Your film, *NO! The Rape Documentary*—it's just extraordinary. There are so many real women telling unflinching stories of sexual assault and rape. There's also, you know, kind of, amazing feminist thinkers trying to put all of that into context and help viewers understand it. But it's still very hard to understand a non-response from our own community. How do you contextualize and explain that?

AISHAH SHAHIDAH SIMMONS: I think as we know and we are, you know, centering Black survivors, but I think it's important to kind of go out for a second, pan out, to say that nobody wants to talk about sexual violence, like regardless of race, gender identity, sexuality, socioeconomic—no one. There's so much shame, blame, stigma. And then when we factor in the impact of racism on lives, in communities, and we see violence committed against our communities, there's the impetus to protect and then that gets translated into protecting those—I use “harm-doers”—protecting the harm-doers at the expense of those who they've harmed. So I think that that's a lot of the origin of the silence. And hearing what Sparkle was sharing, you know, I started working on “NO!” in 1994 and it was like, it was yeah, it was crickets. And there was no social media, no email, nothing. So in terms of just getting out the word and it was really Black women, Black straight, Black queer women, queer communities, communities of color as well really saying, “You know, we're going to support you making this film.” So it was a grassroots effort. But that, that silence is really about protecting. And we're, you know, constantly dealing with, you know, racial stereotypes, tropes. There's all this that we're always having to, you know, hold. Meanwhile, in the words of the late Black gay poet, Essex Hemphill, “a woman or survivor is left to heal their wounds alone.”

[applause]

CHARLES BLOW: Sparkle, this just seems to be waves here. You know, Aishah makes her film in the wake of the Mike Tyson trial for rape, then a wave comes with the R. Kelly situation, and now we're back in a situation where we have another very high profile Black man accused of sexual assault. What has changed, do you believe, in the public that might make this time different?

STEPHANIE “SPARKLE” EDWARDS: I will say I feel like the music industry, the entertainment industry, is having a “coming home to roost” moment. And what I feel like I did was in right timing and the steps I took this wave, I mean, the small word I can use is “crazy.” Just to be here again, and to have another young woman having to go through the things—and many others—because there are many dealing with this Puff situation. But the change, I feel like maybe I started a movement to say, “Y'all can do this. Y'all can come forward and speak up and tell the truth about what's going on with you.” And hopefully it doesn't have to be a video to show. But, you know, we all can't unsee the video with Cassie, you know, just like you can't unsee the video with my niece, for those who may have seen it. But the change, I feel like many are possibly recognizing that we need to believe young girls and women, and we need not throw stones at them, you know, because it's hard coming forward and speaking as, you know, people would know—like the wrath of the public, like is beyond. And we need to support those who are coming forward and believe them. I mean, the change—ever changing.

CHARLES BLOW: Right. Aishah, you touched on this before, which is, you know, the the dilemma, the Black dilemma, which is historically, rape was used as a weapon against Black men, of white women, even when they didn't commit it. And so anybody who's been to, you know, the lynching memorial, almost every one of those placards say the same thing. And yet there is intra-racial sexual violence committed by Black men and, you know, you talk about a kind of community justice or—I want you to explain what that is, because how do we deal with this? And when we're caught in this vise of people feeling like they want to protect people who are generally victimized, even if those people sometimes are victimizers themselves?

AISHAH SHAHIDAH SIMMONS: It's such a um—it's a rocky terrain to walk. And I walk it as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, as well as rape, my sophomore year in college, in terms of when I—I really, I strive every single day to be an abolitionist. And, and I say “striving” because I feel like it's a practice and a praxis. It's not like, “Oh, I just wake up that way.” It is constant because there are times when I'm just like, “No, that—that's it.” And so I share that to say that when I talk about accountability—and I'm in a community of many, many, many people who are talking about transformative justice and restorative justice—it's really about not relying on the state to be the arbiter of what's happening.

And like thinking about R. Kelly or Mike Tyson or, you know, Bill Cosby, Diddy, who've been accused and some convicted of sexual violence. We don't look beyond them a lot of times. It's like, “Oh, they've been locked up. Hooray.” And what about all of the people who allowed this to happen? And this is not the reason why I am—I believe in abolition. But if we think about all the folks who allowed it to happen, there would be a lot of people in jail. And I think, so in terms of like, this Diddy coming out, it's like, well, “Who's going to be next?” And as long as we keep

focusing on the one person and not looking at the systems in place—And so for me, when I think about community accountability, is really holding each other accountable, right? And saying what's said in *NO! The Rape Documentary*, Men Stopping Violence, Sulaiman Nuriddin, you know, like talking about like, "I'm aware of what you've done and you can no longer work here until you get some help."

So what are these things in terms of where we could funnel the—even a fraction—let alone many of the millions of dollars going into policing, in terms of really healing and accountability, and not that burden be on the immediate survivor. They—she, he, they should not have to be worried about what's going to happen to the harm—but that should not be their work. Their work should be focused on healing. But if they knew that the community is going to handle it—and I'm not talking about like, "We're going to take them out."

STEPHANIE "SPARKLE" EDWARDS: I was just going to say.

[laughter]

AISHAH SHAHIDAH SIMMONS: I can't talk about that, but really holding folks accountable and possibly putting them, you know, in some kind of social container for—until they can get themselves together. But really, like, that's—I just really believe in the capacity to transform and heal. And I think that a lot of these— look, let's look at the high celebrities. They've just been able to do it for so long that they're beyond reproach, or they believe it. So what would have happened if someone had stopped it with your niece? What? And so, you see these folks, they just keep going, and they're bragging on videos and all that because they've been able to get away with it. And what would it look like if the community was like, "No!"?

CHARLES BLOW: We laugh about, you know, "take them out." But anyone who has read Maya Angelou, that's literally the reason she stopped speaking. Because she said something and the person wound up dead. And she believed that her words literally had the power of death. So how do we encourage or support more people, whether they be the victims or supporters of those victims from coming forward? Sparkle, what would the right community's response have looked like to you? What did you want to have your community do in response? Not just, not just the judicial system? How did you want your community to respond?

STEPHANIE "SPARKLE" EDWARDS: I would want them to have our backs, and I don't know what else to say but have our backs. Like believe. Because it's hard to come forward, let alone, you know, come forward like, even to your parents. That's the hardest part. But then to come forward to the world, like, that's even harder because you've got the naysayers and the people who are just not believing you and wanting to just stomp on you when you're down, so to speak. And I don't know, I just wish somebody had had my back, you know? Not just for the people who were in my corner, but just the masses like to just see and be like, "She not lying," like, you know, and just have my back. Have my back.

CHARLES BLOW: Aishah, years ago a friend invited me to a church, big Black church, and the speaker was speaking and she said, you know, “God telling me there's someone here”—I think she used the word “rape”—“has been raped and you never told and you should come forward.” And at that moment, people streamed out of the stands. And I have never forgotten that moment because I'd never seen a visual manifestation of how much trauma—unprocessed, unacknowledged, unspoken of, in one room—happen. Talk to us about the scale of what's happening in the Black community that you believe, you know that sexual violence represents for us.

AISHAH SHAHIDAH SIMMONS: I know Black Women's Blueprint did a study—like 60% of Black girls or women have been assaulted by the time that they're 18. And I know the work of A Long Walk Home, that they really are in the trenches with Black girls and non-binary youth doing that work. And I'm one of those 60%. And then for most of most of us who've experienced childhood sexual abuse, chances are, have a high percentage of being sexually violated again. And it is so pervasive. And I also think that that's also part of this enforced silence, because as Sparkle just shared, you know, we're not believed and it almost becomes like a hazing process—“Well, nobody believed me, I don't believe this person.”

You know, it becomes this—we have to break that cycle because that plays a role. And it reminds me, when you were sharing, Charles, about when you were at a church—in 2009, there was a screening of my film at Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia. And it was incredible. And what was incredible was to have the pastor, Tyrone Nelson, and one of his assistant pastors, Dwylyene Butler, like, speak from the pulpit—I'm not a Christian. I was raised Muslim and I am a Buddhist—and then invite me, Black lesbian, non-Christian, to go to the pulpit to talk about sexual violence. In that church—it was like, what you were just saying. The response—and I think there was something profound for those survivors in the room to have their pastor say, “We are going to take this issue on.” And I think that that's what we need in terms of community, the pastor, the imam, the babalawo, ~~for~~ we need the leaders to take this on.

[applause]

CHARLES BLOW: But Sparkle, the data that Aishah just told us about, 60% Black women and girls before they hit 18. To your point that—that's not the same guy doing all 60%. There's a lot of men out there engaged in that violence as well. And as you were pointing out, you believe that some of the people, men who don't say anything about what they may know, what they may have seen, what they may have heard, is because they are also complicit in sexual violence. What would you say to those men?

STEPHANIE “SPARKLE” EDWARDS: I can't say it here.

[laughter]

CHARLES BLOW: This is a safe space.

STEPHANIE “SPARKLE” EDWARDS: There’s going to be a lot of bleep bleep bleep. My mouth could be reckless, so I will keep it cute. But you guys, “Look at it as if you have a sister, your mom, your auntie, look at it this way. What if it was her that a violation was done on? How would you handle it? How would you want it to be handled?” So that's what I would want the fellas to do.

AISHAH SHAHIDAH SIMMONS: Charles? May I please say?

CHARLES BLOW: Yes, go on.

AISHAH SHAHIDAH SIMMONS: I just want to, I mean, I know that we're here lifting up and talking about sexual violence committed against women and girls. But I just—I would be remiss to not just also acknowledge that boys are sexually harmed.

[applause]

Transgender, non-binary folks are sexually harmed. And studies have shown, such as the organization Mirror Memoirs, that they’re some of the most vulnerable communities. So we're dealing with a human problem. And just the layers of silence that just gets compounded. So you know, in terms of what, the silence that, what happens to cisgender women and girls, but then also in terms of men because of patriarchy, and trans folks because of transphobia. So I just wanted to acknowledge that.

STEPHANIE “SPARKLE” EDWARDS: Yeah, I agree.

CHARLES BLOW: Thank you. And I am one of those boys and no one knew about it until I wrote about it, and I was in my forties. Talk a little bit more about the dynamics in family because so much of the violence actually happens in family. It's not a stranger off the street, it's a relative, a cousin, an uncle. And what are the dynamics, the pressures the family feels to report it, say something, acknowledge it or not, to preserve what they believe is the sanctity and peace of that family?

AISHAH SHAHIDAH SIMMONS: Yeah. And I will just share, you know, my story in terms of without getting into details, no triggers at all. I was harmed by the only grandfather I knew on my father's side—and he and my grandmother took care of me a lot while my parents were on the road doing a lot of important and incredible human justice work. And I told. I'm one of the rare, like, little precocious ten-year olds who told and at that time my parents did not remove me. And I—you know, we won't get into all that. I share that to say, it's disturbing the peace. It's bringing the ants to the picnic to quote something that my dad always says in terms of like, when you know, you have this kind of this set up and you need it to work, you need it to be safe, quote unquote, and to disrupt that—for many people, it can be a caregiver, it can be a provider or, you know, all those kinds of things. What do we do with that? And I think that that comes back in

terms of my work around abolition, because I think so much of it is, like we don't want to send another person to jail.

And so what would it look like if that was not the only option—accountability, but not, you know, locked up in a cage somewhere where people are not being taught to transform. So I really believe that we learn, and the family institution gets replicated, right? So first we protect a family member, then we, we protect the athlete, the entertainer. They become an extension of us. I mean, it's amazing to watch how these people support celebrities. So I was like, “Do you know them? Are they your friend?” And they're ready to go to bat. And I think that in so many ways, because we learned that, right? And in, particularly in communities of color, and we're talking about Black communities, we learned that in terms of keeping it in the family, you know, “Be quiet” or “Well, she shouldn't have been doing that,” or “She was fast.”

So all of that kind of messaging happens, and then it just gets compounded because of racism and classism in our communities. It's like, we're all we've got, but in the meantime, we're harming each other.

CHARLES BLOW: Let me turn the page a little bit and just ask both of you what gives you hope in this space that we can at least move forward to a better situation where people are believed more that there is less sexual violence against women and girls particularly in Black communities?

STEPHANIE “SPARKLE” EDWARDS: That we're talking about it. But we gotta keep talking about it. We just gotta keep shedding the light on what is going on and continue to talk, continue to support—just all the good feels of being supported just even allows the young girl or young boy to speak up. You know, as Black folk, we don't have the complexion for the protection as the late, great Paul Mooney would say. So we have to police within, like you stated, and just really uplift each other and don't be so op to think, “Oh, she lying. Oh, he lying.” Just take a beat and be like, “It could be true. So let me pause for a second just to see it out and see what it really is.” And so, yeah.

AISHAH SHAHIDAH SIMMONS: What gives me hope? I mean, the fact that we're here having this conversation gives me hope, right? The work of A Call to Men, of A Long Walk Home, and many, many organizations IamNegrx, Mirror Memoirs, like that, that gives me tremendous hope. And, I know Sparkle had spoken to this, her life's experience, and in mine, in terms of with “NO!” I remember a time, you know, where to speak out against these issues even—I believe that we could have looked at a video of what happened to Cassie—in the nineties, people would find some way to blame her. So I think that we are at a time where we are able to discuss it. This is about the work of #MeToo and Tarana Burke. Like it's just, we're talking about this, this work—and the courageous—I think about the film *On the Record*. And one of my dear friends is featured in this, Sil Lai Abrams. Like just breaking the silence, more and more of us are breaking the silence, and more and more is seen as a community effort, right? Like it is not just like, oh, this is just this woman's issue. Definitely women and queer folks are leading the way, and men are taking this issue up as well.

STEPHANIE “SPARKLE” EDWARDS: And that's key.

AISHAH SHAHIDAH SIMMONS: And that's so critical.

CHARLES BLOW: Well, let me ask you two questions. If you were talking to a survivor of rape or sexual assault now, they were watching this, but they had never told anyone. What would you say to them? And the second part of that is, if you're watching this and you know that you were, you have assaulted someone, or you have raped someone and they never told and nobody knows—what is your responsibility? What should you now do?

AISHAH SHAHIDAH SIMMONS: Oof, Sparkle?

CHARLES BLOW: No, that's for you.

[laughter]

STEPHANIE “SPARKLE” EDWARDS: You got this. Handle it. Handle it for us both.

AISHAH SHAHIDAH SIMMONS: I really, I believe and I understand why people don't break silences. I think for those of us who've experienced sexual violence, it is important for us to speak it. It's important, though, that we speak it, find a place, a person who will believe us and not victim blame us and not cross examine us. So, because that can just send you in a spiral. So I think that that's really important. And thankfully there are crisis lines where, you know, it can be someone you don't even know. It's nice when it is someone you know, but, you know, just to not hold it because it is, we're carrying it in our bones, in our somatic responses. So it is important that we release that trauma, I think. So that's critical. For someone who has caused harm—I think if they are in touch with that person. I can't—I mean, and I know it's a slippery slope because we live in a carceral state. I do believe that it is important in terms of being accountable for the harm that they've caused. I really believe that, I also believe the way, it's not the same, but the way in which people who have been harmed hold the trauma, the people who harm hold the trauma. And so to free themselves and to free the person they harmed, by speaking.

CHARLES BLOW: I want you all to give a big round of applause. Thank you so much for coming. Don't miss our next episode of Ideas at Ford with Charles Blow. Thank you.

[applause]

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Additional Media courtesy of

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