



Araiye Thomas-Haysbert

South Sacramento Building Health Communities (BHC) Resident Profile

In 2010, The California Endowment (TCE) launched the Building Healthy Communities (BHC) initiative, a 10-year, \$1 billion program to improve the health of 14 communities in California. The South Sacramento area is one of the 14 communities where residents, community-based organizations, local government, and educational institutions collaborate to advance racially equitable policies and practices.

Araiye Thomas-Haysbert, 19, was born in Sacramento, and moved with her family to Arizona when she was in the fifth grade. She and her family moved back to Sacramento her freshman year of high school and experienced homelessness for two years before moving into the Greenway housing community in the South Sacramento BHC area. While living at Greenway, Araiye became connected to the South Sacramento BHC through PRO Youth and Families (PRO), a nonprofit organization and BHC grantee focused on youth development.

Via the South Sacramento BHC Araiye has participated in the annual Sisterhood Rising Leadership Retreat and the Queer and Trans Youth Summit for the past three years, completed the YO! California Emerging Leaders Organizers' Fellowship, was a member of the Zero Tolerance Youth Leadership Team, was a facilitator for the South Sacramento BHC Hub Youth Leadership Academy, is a member of the Youth Engagement Action Team, and is the Junior Youth Mentor for the South Sacramento BHC Youth Leadership Team (YLT).

Araiye is a sophomore and Sociology major at Cosumnes River College. She is employed as a Youth Engagement Coordinator for PRO. Araiye believes that her involvement in the BHC led her to become a **youth leader** who is **confident in her identity** as a woman of color and member of the LGBTQ community.

Path from Participant to Leader

Araiye remembers vividly the day in the summer of 2015, when shortly after moving into the Greenway housing community, she was invited to the Sisterhood Rising Leadership Retreat. Sisterhood Rising is a six-day retreat for cisgender and transgender women, and gender non-conforming youth from the 14 BHC sites to develop their leadership skills, increase their understanding of social emotional health, and become empowered through the application of a gender and racial justice lens to frame their personal narrative. During this time, Araiye recalled being at a crossroads in her life:

“In my mind I was like I need to figure out when I go to high school what I want to do and become. I can go this way or that way – this way is drugs and fast cash or sit over here and be productive and not get in trouble ... Alondra [a PRO employee] came in and asked if we want to go to this camp called Sisterhood Rising.”

According to Araiye, “young women often see each other as competition.” Through Sisterhood Rising, Araiye learned the value of sisterhood and to “see people in a different light, which allowed me to change myself and how I was acting.” For Araiye, being in a space predominately comprised of women of color fostered a sense of belonging and empowerment that prompted her to return to Sisterhood Rising the following years.

“That is what caused me to go back for the next two years – I saw women like me, women of color, teaching powerful stuff...that is [like] nothing I was seeing in my everyday life.”

Overall, the invitation to Sisterhood Rising shaped Araiye’s future trajectory and inspired her to become a youth leader.

With an awakened sense of self, Araiye became immersed in several BHC activities such as the Queer and Trans Youth Summit and the YO! California Emerging Leaders Organizers’ Fellowship, as well as the YLT and Zero Tolerance Youth Leadership Team.

In May of 2017, Araiye attended the Free Our Dreams event with the Zero Tolerance Youth Leadership Team. This BHC funded event occurs annually and is an opportunity for youth to learn about social injustices and receive training in preparation for legislative visits with lawmakers. Through this event the youth have an opportunity to use their leadership skills toward changing and advancing policy. In 2017 the youth advocated for the passage of SB 607, which would have expanded the existing law prohibiting schools from suspending students in kindergarten through third grade for “willful defiance” to students in the fourth through twelfth grade, but the bill was vetoed by the Governor in September 2018. For Araiye, willful defiance was an issue she experienced personally in high school:

“A [teacher] accused me of sagging my pants. He told me to lift my shirt up in front of the class and I refused, [so] he sent me out of the class. He would then send me out every day, five days a week. I had over 30 referrals from him because of willful defiance. He kept putting 0’s in my gradebook, and I had an F in his class ... it ruined my ability to go to a California State University because I could not use his class as an “A-G” transfer. That is why I was behind SB 607. It [willful defiance] messed with me, my grades, and ruined my education – it really affected me.”

According to Araiye, the Free Our Dreams experience gave her confidence to speak to public officials and decision makers: “after [Free Our Dreams], I was like, I got this, I can talk to anyone, regardless of [their] title.” Araiye is now in a youth leadership role in the BHC, as a Junior Youth Mentor for the YLT. Araiye attributes the BHC as the “spark” that unlocked her strengths and gave her a **sense of purpose**:

“If I would have not connected with the BHC at all, I probably would not be in any type of leadership [positions]. I would probably be...not really utilizing my talents ... instead of doing the work that I really feel empowered in.”

Empowerment through BHC

According to Araiye, the skill building and leadership opportunities provided by BHC helped Araiye **secure a job as a Youth Engagement Coordinator** with PRO. Araiye was asked to co-facilitate a South Sacramento BHC All Grantee Convening due to her leadership role with the YLT. A PRO employee saw Araiye facilitate at the convening and encouraged her to apply for a job with his organization. According to Araiye, “seeing how they [BHC adult allies] do it [facilitate workshops] helped me get that position at PRO.” Araiye also attributes her **strong sense of identity** to BHC:

“Prior to being in BHC, I did not feel comfortable at all. I grew up in a very religious household... [there was] a lot around my sexuality that they felt was wrong ... Without BHC, I would not be comfortable enough to go out and be like, ‘hey I am gay, and I do not really care what you say about that.’ But prior to that, I was always in a box. I did not really want to disclose who I was because I was not comfortable with who I was... but now, I feel that I am sure of myself, that I am a leader ... I know who I am.”

Ultimately, BHC has provided a nurturing environment for Araiye to become a **youth leader**.

“ [Being a youth leader] gave me the opportunity to have my voice heard and also be the voice for those who often go voiceless. ”

In her leadership capacity, Araiye brings back what she learns at BHC events to **inspire other youth to become leaders**, and to use their collective power to make change. Because of her lived experience, Araiye understands that a lot of BHC youth are, “so stuck in the bubble of thinking that their voice does not matter and that they are not cared about.” Araiye shared what she tells BHC youth to inspire them to dream and become advocates for change:

“Even though statistics say you are not going to go nowhere, do not listen to them because they are just trying to keep you at the same spot. Those are your oppressors trying to keep you oppressed.”

When asked what will sustain the BHC beyond 2020 or the end of the ten-year timeframe of the initiative, Araiye was quick to proclaim **youth leadership**:

“The youth that they [BHC] have impacted. I believe that the BHC has a lot of resources that we [youth] are definitely going to utilize beyond 2020 even if it is not physical resources. I am going to use it. I am going to take those resource and knowledge and spread it.”

