

Building community through movement: A conversation with the founders of Walk with a Doc and Semilla Cultural

Movement is important for a person's health and well-being. The good news is: many activities that promote movement come with enormous benefits that extend beyond physical health.

Today's discussion features the founders of two organizations that aim to promote physical activity — and build community while doing it.

[Walk with a Doc](#) began in 2005 after Dr. David Sabgir, a cardiologist in Columbus, Ohio, invited his patients to go for a walk with him in a local park. The program has since spread to more than 500 locations.

[Semilla Cultural](#), founded by Isha M. Renta López, is a non-profit organization in the Washington, D.C., area that promotes the development and cultivation of a community that embraces Puerto Rican culture and arts, including by teaching and performing the Puerto Rican musical genre of Bomba.

Sabgir and López spoke with Health Disparities podcast hosts Dr. Hadiya Green and Christin Zollicoffer. The conversation was recorded in person at the 2023 Movement Is Life annual Health Equity Summit.

The following transcript of this podcast episode has been lightly edited for clarity.

Hadiya Green: You're listening to the Health Disparities podcast -- a program of Movement is Life, being recorded live and in person at Movement is Life's annual Health Equity Summit. Our theme this year is: Bridging the Health Equity gap in vulnerable communities. And as always, we are convening with a wonderful community of participants, workshop leaders and speakers.

I'm Dr. Hadiya Green, I am the Founder and President of Healthy Healing Community.

Christin Zollicoffer: And I am Christin Zollicoffer, Vice President, Belonging and Equity Office, Lifespan Health Systems.

We are excited to have convened a workshop titled "Empowerment and Joy through Movement."

*Preview quote – **Dr. David Sabgir:** "So the best both physical and mental benefits are going from the couch to a 5k, (laughter) as opposed to turning 5K-ers into marathoners and it's, it's, it's -- you're swimming upstream."*

CZ: On this episode of the podcast, which is audio only, we won't be demonstrating movement, but we will be talking about the benefits of movement and hearing our guests' stories. Please introduce yourselves.

Dr. David Sabgir: Hello, I am Dr. David Sabgir, I'm a doctor practicing cardiovascular medicine. And I'm the founder of Walk with a Doc based in Columbus, Ohio.

Isha M. Renta López: Hi everyone, my name is Isha M. Renta López, Founder and Director, Semilla Cultural, based in and around the Washington, D.C., area.

HG: Welcome to you both, we're excited to have you. So our workshop is really celebrating the joy of movement, the way that moving our bodies in whatever way we might choose brings multiple benefits. For today's episode, we are going to invite our guests to share with us how the initiatives that they lead are beneficial at multiple levels, maybe even ways that are in addition to what one might initially expect. The three themes that we'd like to explore are, first, building community, second, improving physical health, and third, improving mental health.

CZ: So we're going to ask our guests to talk about each of these themes and will chime in with additional perspectives as we go. So let's start by asking Isha to share with us all tell us a little about Samia cultural, and how your activities helped to build community.

IRL: Happy to talk about Semilla Cultural. So, Semilla Cultural started in 2014, officially. And we are basically mainly focused on the practice the traditional practice of Bomba, which is our oldest documented music and dance practice from Puerto Rico. And it was practiced by the enslaved people of Puerto Rico. And you know, we have over 400 years of history, and he has gone through multiple, you know, it has evolved through time.

We are one of the few local groups ... [and] the leading group that is focused on educating the community on the tradition of dance, and also the music. The music is percussion-based, and the particularity, and I think one of the most interesting things about Bomba is that when you are dancing Bomba, you have a bass rhythm going, so you need at least two drummers. So you have one drummer that is going to be keeping the bass along with a maraca. And the drum sticks are called the cuás, so those are the three main instruments that we use. But the leading drummers called the primo or subidor, or prime premier first drum, and that drummer has to watch the dancers movements because the dancer's movements are going to be marked in the drum as drum beats. So those dance movements have to be sharp, so that when the, the you know, the drummer is going to mark them, he or she has to be aware that, you know, when is that, when do I mark that movement.

So we use the arms, use the feet, we use our shoulders, our elbows, so this is a full body movement that's improvised, and within the different Bomba rhythms that exist, I cannot give you a specific name because every elder that I asked give me a different number. But within the different rhythms and the five most popular ones you'll find different emotions that it gives you and it produces on you. So usually when we dance, what I tell my students is when you are going to dance Bomba, you have to connect with the song. You cannot improvise your movements without connecting to the vocals because they're connected to the drumming.

So you can actually tell your story, and sometimes even become vulnerable. So when we are creating community in Bomba, we're basically doing it twofold. We're doing it in the individual face of me as an individual -- what connects with me, do I want to dance, do I want to drum, do I want to sing, do I want to do the maraca, do I want to do the cuá. But then that individuality then becomes, you know, collective as a community because you can not do Bomba by yourself. You need to have at least multiple, you know, at least four people like for each part, like the vocals, the drumming, the maracas, the cuás, but then you'd also in the dancers, so as part of one bite, you need the movement, so that you can connect the whole community. So it's a collective, it's an individual and collective approach. And we have an informal gathering...

CZ: Well, I was gonna say, I didn't want to interrupt your thought. But whenever I've seen Bomba dancers, right, it also is, I've seen both male and female dancers. But it seems as though the vast majority, especially in the beautiful dresses, I see the women. And so how empowering is it also for women to lead the effort and be able to have an outlet to express themselves emotionally?

IRL: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. And that's, I think that's the beauty of Bomba, when I said earlier, you become vulnerable as you dance, because as you're putting your emotions out there. Not everybody is prepared mentally to put their emotions out there. And it takes also a challenge because in the tradition, right now, you dance one at a time in front of the drum. So it's like, when I teach, I have a whole class and the students I remember, when I started as a dancer, like, going out by myself to dance in a circle of people, it was intimidating. So you have to disconnect, the way I tell the students, you have to disconnect your surroundings, so that you can focus on you. And you can focus on the lead drummer, and connect with the music.

And it takes like a mental, you know, mental part of you kind of like, Okay, forget about everything, let's focus on this and, and it gets moments that it becomes very emotional. You know, I've had moments where I have cried, because I'm dancing, I have moments that I have cried, because I'm seeing someone dance. And the emotion is so strong, there's a lot of energy, you know, there's the energy from the vocals, there's the energy from the drumming, there's the energy from the dancing. So there's all this collective energy that's happening in that space. And so it's just beautiful, being able to manifest yourself using skirts too, as a tool to even empower you more.

And I'll tell you that, you know, as part of Bomba history, the skirts were something that gave women more visibility in the dance because back in time, women were allowed to dance, but they were not using this big skirt that, you know, that came later on. And it gave women more empowerment to use those tools now. And now I love dancing with a skirt, it gives me that extra tool to be able to like manifest myself.

HG: So I love that you touched on the energy and the spirit with which music and movement and can't really not just empower a person but even change levels on a physiological and mental level. And I think that that's one of the beautiful things about music is that you can hear a tune or rhythm or a beat and you can remember all the lyrics or it takes you back to that time,

space in place for you as an individual and/or what your surrounding community was like for you. And so that makes me think of the connection between the movement and even the that we know movement increases a person's endorphins, right? Your happy hormones, right?

And with our other guest, Dr. Sabgir, with the Walk with a Doc. People are moving in your program, and you're connecting with people on a physiological level, doing a everyday movement, even something such as walking, which is innate to us, right? Take the baby out of the womb, and they literally, if you brush their feet, they will walk. That's one of our innate things, but it's something that we can lose with time. And so I'd love to make that connection and ask you, Dr. Sabgir, what was some of the genesis behind why you started and how you started Walk with a Doc and some of those impacts that you've seen on the community level?

DS: Sure. Thank you, Hadiya. I started Walk with a Doc because I was frustrated with my ability to motivate my patients to be active because I couldn't agree with you more. It's everything. Movement is everything. And in cardiology, what I practice, you know, unfortunately there... the number one killer, heart disease, and we're doing everything we can to reduce high blood pressure, diabetes, cholesterol, and we can make a significant dent in that by being active. And I would, as a resident I would talk to my patients about how important it was and I realized, after years, I'm a little dense, it took me a while, that it was totally ineffective when they came back for six and 12 month follow ups. So I wanted to have the patient have to say no to my face. So I asked them if they were willing to join my family and I at the park on a Saturday morning for a walk. And it all just blossomed from there.

CZ: It takes a lot of interest. And I see your face light up. I know we're audio. So you can't really see how David's face is lighting up, and Isha's face lighting up when they're talking about their passions. It's a beautiful thing to see. Right. And it was pretty awesome that you brought your family into it too. But pushing patients to challenge them and think differently, because not only did you invite them to come out, you offered connection. Tell us a little bit more about the importance of the connection.

DS: I'm so glad you brought that up. The connection is everything, it's the X Factor of Walk with a Doc and, you know, some people may like having a doctor there but everyone likes having colleagues, friends, neighbors loved ones there to support them. And Dr. Murthy, our Surgeon General, has spoken beautifully about the importance of social connection and that was something... I started this just to get people active, that simple thing, and it turns out that the social connection is at least as important as this critical piece of physical activity.

CZ: Is this a good time now to get a drumming?

IRL: Yeah. So to connect what I was saying earlier about the drumming, about you know Bomba connecting with the emotions. In Bomba, we have multiple rhythms and every rhythm gives you a different emotion and you know, I listened to the drum like, for example, I'll give you some simple examples. 2017, my grandfather passed away and the rhythm of Yubá is the rhythm that I felt like dancing, so that rhythm is usually connected to sadness. [DRUMBEATS]

Now if I make it a little bit faster, then it can connect more with like anger emotions.

[DRUMBEATS]

And then there's the rhythm of holandés, which is usually associated with happy and joy.

[DRUMBEATS]

The rhythm of Cuembé is more associated with like flirtiness and some people, even when I teach this in class, and I asked the students, what do you feel like when you listen to this rhythm, they say flow or waves. So listen to it. [DRUMBEATS]

And the last one I'll do for you is Seis Corrido, which is associated to the town of Loíza and that one is usually very speed. I'm not going to play it as fast as you know, an actual professional drummer. But it's usually more also flirtiness but like, it has a lot of hip movement is very very upbeat. And it's usually one of the favorites from the communities like it's very quick. But I'll do my best (laughter).

CZ: You've got this, Isha.

IRL: [DRUMBEATS] So that's a Corrido, so if you can, if you could tell even, how do you feel yourself.

HG: Yeah, I totally can feel the rhythm of the beats and you know when my face starts to smile when your rhythm picks up, the more introspective I felt when you played just slower beats and really trying to follow you and feel what you're expressing through the drums and I think that is a phenomenal gift of music, right? It's the part that you're not necessarily in control of. And I think that's true to movement as well. There's certain things that movement does that people aren't aware of is happening to them.

And to that end, I wanted to ask you, Dr. Sabgir, is there unexpected outcomes that you ran into moving from that being a resident and now, a full-blown physician -- you've done your residencies and fellowships and you're asking these people to just move, you just wanted them to be active. But what are some of the other outcomes that were not necessarily the intended outcomes, but still positive from being active and moving?

DS: I love that question, please call me, David. We realized the power of nature early on. We started in 2005. And there's been some really fantastic research in the last several years, about how important nature is for our health. And the current dose we know of this nature of medicine is 120 minutes a week. So we'd love to get our share of that when we go for our weekly walks together. Probably the most important thing has been breaking down barriers, the barrier between the white coat of the physician and the patient, racial barriers, socioeconomic barriers. Really, you name it, that has been probably the most beautiful thing that I've seen. One other one is education.

We learned that early on that our health care providers speaking at the beginning for a few minutes was very powerful, back to that social connection piece, kind of as an icebreaker to bring us together and maybe flush out some really important questions that our participants may have. So yeah, we started simple going for a walk. And we've learned along the way over the last I guess, 18 years.

CZ: I'm curious when you say community, right? Parks look different based on your zip code. And safety is different based on your zip code. So when you're asking folks to come to a park, are you considered, did you have to change locations? Did you have to make accommodations for those who needed to take public transportation? Talk to me about how you had to shift your Walk with a Doc based on social determinants of health?

DS: Yeah, critical question. And we are blessed to be all over, we've, not as all over as we want to be yet, we're in about 535 communities around the world. So that answer is dependent on where we are. We strongly encourage all our starting chapters, and we're starting about 10 to 15, hopefully 20 a month, we encourage them to be in ADA-accessible sites. But even that's not enough. And we encourage locations that are amenable to everyone possible. And ideally, there is public transit to the location. But it's a learning process. And we have a long way to go. And we're, we're doing what we can right now.

HG: I think that David touched on something really critical. And you mentioned the ADA. And earlier you mentioned 120 minutes of nature, which made me think of the National Physical Activity Plan. And that sets the recommendations for how active and how much time adults and our children should be active in a week to you know, stay relatively healthy, and I think it's 150. So it's only a 30 minute difference. And I think to about what Christin mentioned as far as accessibility and how people who may not walk but still need to be active, right? It's just as important for someone who may transport by wheelchair and have a spinal cord injury to move, right, so they don't get bed sores, so they have whatever circulation that they're not getting from being able to walk, and has that been an integral part of this learning part of the expansion of Walk with a Doc, or is this something that is secondary and maybe even something that you didn't necessarily have to consider initially but now might have some intention behind expanding it not just throughout the world, but throughout the various communities, and people that make up communities.

DS: Exactly. I look at this as a lifelong learning process, and I feel, you know, woefully insufficient, most of the time as we're starting this, so it's having the right intention, we do have a Walk and Roll with a Doc in Dallas, at the Tom Landry center, but you know, that's, that's one location, out of a lot of locations. So we try and make it accessible. And, you know, back to the the critically important issue regarding health and underserved areas and zip codes that aren't, just where it's not quite as safe, we're providing robust scholarships, mostly free to doctors and healthcare providers in underserved areas to try and facilitate bringing the walk to locations where it might not normally be.

And you're exactly right. You know, a lot of physicians may live in zip codes that don't have as many issues and they may choose parks that are close to their house to have Walk with a Doc. So we need to do everything we can to support those physicians, but also bring the walk to the most needed areas where, you know, it may not be the first go to and we're trying to do that through partnerships and robust scholarships. So starting the walk is essentially free. And then providing everything from soup to nuts on how to get it going.

CZ: You mentioned free and I think about both Isha, the dancing, Bomba, as well as walking, the cost, but it's also accessibility. And being able to carry those beats with you. Knowing that at anytime you have access to a rhythm in your mind right? Or you're planting the seeds, that movement is so important, getting your grandmother out, going for a walk, even if you're dancing along the way, talk about how important it is to at least plant the seeds to just start somewhere.

IRL: Well, that's the name of the organization. Semilla is seed, so that was the whole idea was how, you know, starting a community from from scratch. At a certain point, like I know, I practice Bomba here in DC, I started dancing Bomba here in DC. So there was some community already, but then having, trying to increase that that's why the organization started within educational focus. So just trying to give them that spark, initiate that spark of interest. So this is a tradition that has been here for 100 years plus, you know, and you haven't heard of it, but it's from, you know, the African diaspora. How do we connect, so it's kind of like finding ways to connect to the other communities besides the Puerto Rican community. So in one of the projects that we have led in the organization, which started kind of like, an idea, how do we connect to other people that are interested in African diasporic genres, is a project that we're calling music evolution in the African diaspora. And we're actually going to have a summit next year for the first time, and it's bringing how music and dance of the African diaspora connect to Bomba so that we can see how we're all connected somehow. We have the same root of African music and dance. How do we connect? So this the upcoming year we're going to have salsa music, Africo-Colombia music and also jazz music. So we're going to be we're looking for that way.

CZ: Where is this?

IRL: This is going to be May 18, it's going to be in Fredericksburg, Virginia, and we're bringing in speakers panels, we're doing workshops, we're doing workshops, and we're doing also a concert at the end of the day, so that people can understand the history, have interactive workshops and then actually feel the live music of the movement and beats. So, and the intention is actually that just planting that seed to see because I think once you start this part, and with all the information accessibility that we have nowadays on our phones, you know, we can then dig a little bit deeper about, you know, what is this and what, how does it connect to me as an individual and how do I can connect to make community? So I think it's always starting with a self evaluation and then moving broader.

DS: So the best both physical and mental benefits are going from the couch to a 5k, (laughter) as opposed to turning 5K-ers into marathoners and it's, it's, it's -- you're swimming upstream.

You know, I will talk to patients that I've had now for 20 years, and I'll invite them to walk with a doc every 6, 12 months, and they may not accept ever, or they may accept, you know, the 10th or 15th time I ask. So I've learned this whole concept along the way, as I've been banging my head against the wall that sometimes it takes many, many requests. And, you know, eventually we'll get there. And I think all of us around the table want it to happen sooner than it is. But I think as long as we're fighting the good fight with the right intentions, you know, we'll eventually get there. And it's... the journeys quite fun along the way.

CZ: Well, you know, I appreciate you saying that, because as a woman who is divorced, and had three children as single mom, the invitation helps, but you have to be able to navigate: how am I going to fit this in to my life demands? And so, not giving up on them and meeting them where they are, that 10th time, it may take that much time to say, Okay, this is something that I want to do, I have to create space for it. So kudos to you all for not giving up.

DS: Well, it's kind of you. I mean, I've seen the same thing on myself. I've seen nonprofits that I love and want to get really integrated in and just don't have the time I wish to do it. So I can see from the other side. And then one thing additionally, to your point, Christin, that we hope to do it walk with a doc is someone may say, if he thinks I'm gonna drive 22 miles to go for a walk. That's crazy. But maybe they can say you know what, I can, by the time I were to drive to Walk with a Doc, I could be out my door, walk three blocks, do this, come back home, see my kids. So it's also that spirit of the message.

HG: I think that it is really key to what I was talking about with someone earlier is to find your people. And we're talking about community throughout our entire discussion about movement, its physical and mental impact. And I think with both of your organizations, the opportunity has been given for people to potentially even redefine who they are, let alone who their people are, right? You give them another opportunity to connect, to Christin's point, to build community, which can also ultimately do exactly what you said, which is to change behavior, right, or to renavigate the way one behaves. And I would love, because I feel like being people who have poured your life's desires into a cause or into an effort, you have taken yourself and working with other people to another level of vulnerability.

So, one, my hat's off to you for that and, two, would love to know because I think people always want to know what do you do, right? When a doctor tells me to do something, or someone asks me to do a certain dance, I'm like, Would you tell your mother to do that? Would you ask her, is that the same advice you'd give your sister? What is one thing that in this time of your giving of yourself, in addition to what you do on a day to day basis, do you do for your own physical and or mental health?

IRL: This, like Bomba, is my physical and mental health center basically. So I work an eight to five job sitting at a desk all day. And you know, I have two girls and I have to run around take them to their events around but usually the weekends I teach Bomba, so I'm doing an hour an hour two hour dance class. That's my workshop, like my workout right there. And one of the fulfillments I get from Bomba is when I listen to the impact from my students directly, and that's

that's when I, you know, I started this because I found a gap in myself that I needed to connect to my identity to connect to Puerto Rico. And that's when I decided if I Boriqua that left Puerto Rico have had this gap. How many other Boriquas that are here has this gap? And how could this project benefit them? And that's when the project started.

So when I hear like, for example, last December, we perform at the Smithsonian museum right in their lobby, main lobby, and you know, you hear how loud the drum is, so, the echo there was amazing. But hearing people after the performance, saying, I suddenly felt that I was in Puerto Rico, other Boriquas that went to see us, I felt that I was, it was in December, so we played a lot of like holiday carols and music. And so hearing that or like, asking my students, you know, how do you feel about this class, and they are telling me with all the personal problems that I have, this is my escape. Bomba balances my life because I have these problems at home. So when I'm drumming, I forget about all that, or when I'm dancing, you know, I get to move because I'm so sedentary at home all the time.

So it's like listening to those little things that make me think like, this is beyond what I thought it would be one day, you know, it started like a small idea, okay, let's connect to community because, you know, I miss it, and maybe others, but no, like the impact is beyond what I could have expected or imagined at the time that I created. So it's beautiful. It's very fulfilling, and my soul is full, this is my soul food, so that's how I take care of myself basically.

HG: An unintended reaffirmation. That's beautiful. And David what's something that you do for your physical and mental health?

DS: Yeah, maybe similar in the sense that it's it is my soul food. I realize when I'm feeling down a lot of the times, it's because I haven't been with friends. So I do love walking, running, cycling. I do like swimming, that's not a social activity. But the most important thing to me is doing that with my friends, whatever the activity is, I always leave feeling two or three times happier. Whether it's walking with friends, a Walk with a Doc, or biking or running with friends. It always makes me happy.

CZ: Just to see the smiles on your face is so so nice to see. And I can tell you, so I lived in Chicago for 27 years. And my close is one of my closest friends is Boriqua. And so our daughters would do Bomba together. And we looked forward to it, right? It's smiles on their faces, the music, the community, it's in how it's just very, extremely powerful, especially when you get the students young, and they can create an outlet for themselves. So you all are doing fantastic work.

So is there anything else when you think about your goals? And I hate to put it in such action oriented words, right? But when you dream, how about that? When you dream, where do you think your dreams will take you in the next few years, both David and Isha?

DS: Thank you. I love that question. So as I mentioned, we're around 535 chapters. And my goal is always around numbers and growing that and it sounds artificial to say that or but what

we've seen is each Walk with a Doc, what it does for their community is, really feels magical. I am not smart enough to have created something like this, we just got super lucky. And so I want as many as possible. And we're doing everything within our power to facilitate bringing Walk with a Doc all over the world and ideally, three years from now I would love to have to triple our number and maybe more importantly be able to making sure that we are continuing to provide this to any healthcare provider who wants to connect with their community in this way.

IRL: For me, I would say there is the personal goal that I have. I'm actually finishing my first children's book on Bomba.

CZ: Congratulations!

IRL: Thank you. So it should be published within the next month or two. So so my first goal is to, this is the first of several Bomba children's book, children's book focused on Bomba that, that I want to publish. I want to make sure that their legacy is beyond just the classroom, but there's something tangible that if I'm not here someday, and leave resources for the community in general that they can find. And it's not, it's a kid's book, but it really is for everybody. I had a few friends and family members read it already. And they're like saying how they liked the story plus the educational part of the book. So it's like, really for everybody. So that's my personal goal is just to leave several of those. But then also see how the tradition can be used for can be like, spread out more into like mental health, I'm seeing an increase in the events of Bomba connecting with mental health, but also physical health, and looking for all the other benefits that, the spirituality of it as well. So all these benefits of the tradition has, and you know, composing more songs, I think, to know, Bomba tells stories about our communities, you know, life stories. So I think it's very important that we also, you know, keep a legacy of of what's happening in our communities through through storytelling and music. So I think that's another one.

HG: I'm excited to hear about your goals coming to fruition and being realized, and I hope you do audiobooks with those children's books, because I think that would be amazing to listen to, and, you know, it's been a huge honor to sit with both of you, to see these organic organizations that have come to actually really feed and uplift the communities that exist, right. It's not that you came in somewhere to change the world or to change people and who their imminent being is, but to enhance who they are and what they can be and their full healthy selves on a physical and mental level. So thank you for the work that you both continue to do. And definitely, we are proud to be in partnership with you at Movement is Life. Part of our theme this year is bridging these gaps of health disparities. And so the work you do speaks to that and exudes that.

CZ: I just wanna say thank you, it's been an absolute pleasure. And for those who are listening, we encourage you to seek out resources close to you whether they are Bomba, you know, dance in your community, or there's a nearby Walk with a Doc, or you can start your own chapter. We thank you all so much.

HG: Well, that brings us to the end of another episode of the Health Disparities podcast. Thanks to my guests, David and Isha, and thanks to all our listeners for joining us on America's leading health equity podcast. Until next time, be safe and be well.

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