



## **I AM AMERICA TRANSCRIPT**

### *EPISODE 5: NURTURING MASCULINITY WITH KIER GAINES*

**NICHOLE:** Parts of today's episode include adult language and mentions of violence. Listener discretion is advised.

**KIER:** It's funny when you a parent, you think it's all the big things you do that shape your children's personality. The don't do this and don't do that. But it's, it's them watching you and watching how you operate in large part that really makes them who they are. And I, I think that's what happened to me.

**KIER:** I am Kier Gaines, husband, girl dad times two, and licensed therapist.

**TER:** Kier Gaines will be the first person to tell you that he doesn't have all the answers, but he does have the desire to know more about how we heal and how we grow, and the willingness to do his own healing and growing. He is especially interested in the healing of Black men, Black families and the Black community as a whole.

**TER:** Kier grew up having to make sense of two opposing worlds, a safe and loving home with his mother filled with hugs, kisses, and forgiveness, and the world outside that was filled with aggression, where fighting for a reason or no reason was normal.

**TER:** As I listened to Kier's story, I started thinking about masculinity. What is it? There's so much discussion about toxic masculinity, but not a lot of talk about the

other versions of masculinity. What does it take to be a man? What does it take to be a Black man? I was struck by how Kier navigated the confusing contradictions of masculinity as the center of his world was falling out.

**TER:** Guided by the light inside him, the melodic cadence of his childhood, and his mother's ideology of being a good person, Kier is sent on a life journey that results in a redefining of masculinity and specifically, Black masculinity. One that is not based in gender norms, but instead based in humanity.

**TER:** Now a husband, a father, and a licensed therapist, he is living a life he never envisioned.

**TER:** I'm your Executive Producer Tracee Ellis Ross and this is I Am America, where we meet people who are redefining their own identity, the idea of community, and the possibility of our country.

**TER:** These stories are beautiful, heavy and light and they allow us to reimagine and reframe what we know about this country.

**TER:** Today's story is produced by Showrunner Nichole Hill and this is Kier Gaines.

**NICHOLE:** Kier grows up in the 90s with his funny, charismatic, outgoing mother, Sheila Gaines.

**NICHOLE:** She's a single parent raising Kier with the help of her mother in the Southeast neighborhood of Washington, D.C.

**KIER:** My mom was this, this kind of hippie who believed in freedom. Believed that you should be able to speak your mind even as a child sometimes, to a point. She believed that little boys should have expression, that little boys should be boys. She always gave me so much love. Always hugs and kisses. Always forgiveness. That was every interaction. I never felt like it, it wasn't okay to cry. My house didn't teach me that, the neighborhood taught me that.

**KIER:** D.C. is broken up into four corners. Southeast is by far the most impoverished of the four corners.

**KIER:** The first place we lived, it caught on fire. My mom just so happened to hear it and got us out of there, but everything was already engulfed in flames. That really informed the rest of my life. Just the unsteadiness of it all. That's the word I think of when I think of growing up in that neighborhood. You never knew which way somebody was going to

come at you, whether it was a high five or face punch. You get used to people pulling guns on you, as crazy as that sounds. You get used to fighting, maybe for a reason, maybe for no reason, it just depends. It's just like this level of unpredictability. You always feel like you're on edge and on the other side, inside my house, was love and music, and culture, and dancing.

**NICHOLE:** And singing. Kier's mom was always a big fan of a silly song.

**KIER:** She had some fire joints. Y'all, you know, "The Green Grass Grows All Around?" We used to sing that walking to the bus stop. It's like, you know, once you advance in the song, it'd be like, "Well, the beak on the bird, and the bird in the egg, and the egg in the nest, and the nest on the branch, and the branch on the limb, and the limb on the tree, and the tree in the hole, and the hole in the ground, and the green grass grows all around, all around, and the green grass grows all around." It's a nice little bouncing repetition that make the cold ass bus stop not feel as blustery in the winter. It was, it was a beautiful childhood to experience. Real melodic. That's probably why I became a rapper in my later years.

**NICHOLE:** When he's a pre-teen Kier meets the boys that become his closest friends and they start hanging out together, and rapping, and looking for examples of the kind of men they might be when they grow up.

**KIER:** My earliest encounters with just the concept of masculinity is thinking about the dudes in the neighborhood, some of the Coke dealers, some of the PCP dealers in the neighborhood. I really look up to these guys, you know. And they had money, they had the women, they had the cleanest Nikes. They have everything that you believe you can't have in this living environment.

**KIER:** And, uh, you wanna have the stuff. You wanna be in the presence of these dudes or be like these men, but you know that something is wrong. Like something's amiss here. Nobody else in this neighborhood has money to dress like that, but those are the only men who are around.

**NICHOLE:** Kier doesn't know his Dad and when his mother talks about him, she's usually pretty vague.

**NICHOLE:** There were some uncles around but they didn't seem all that interested in hanging out with a kid. One year he had a Black male teacher, but it was just that one time.

**NICHOLE:** But even without other men to point to as examples, his mother was able to instill in him a strong sense of what she believed it took to be a man.

**KIER:** She raises me to be almost like this whole ideology that if you're a good person, you'll be a good man by default. And I can't say I, I grow up trying to be a good man, or tryna, I don't know, chase an ideal or chase this vision or this image. It's, I just grow up tryna be a good person.

**NICHOLE:** In 2004, at the end of his senior year of high school, Kier's mom passes away from cancer.

**NICHOLE:** He's 18. He doesn't know to look for a counselor to help him navigate the grief or come up with a plan for how to do life without her, but he does have his friends.

**KIER:** My friends showed up for me, to something as simple as calling and having the space to say, man, I'm lost. I feel like I'm falling. And I, there's nothing around me to grab onto. And I think I'ma hit the floor and just have that person sit with you. A person sitting with you, not feeling compelled to fill space with words. And also have like this deep love and understanding of who you are. They don't tell you what they think you need to hear to make the situation not awkward. They tell you, you know, you need to hear because they love you and they know you. And that is a life saving thing.

**NICHOLE:** After her death Kier continues living in his neighborhood and making ends meet. He keeps rapping, hoping to make a career out of it.

**NICHOLE:** From the outside, he seems okay. But he's angry... at his family for believing he could ever be okay without his mom and at his mom, for leaving him.

**KIER:** The girl I was dating at the time, she had recently graduated with her degree in Biology, from Norfolk State University. And she looked me in the face one day, was like, "You need a college degree." And I'm like, "Nah, man, I don't need no college degree." I can rap. College is for people that can't flow. I'm nice with it. I'm not giving into the system. And you know, then I started realizing that this job I have, I'm not gonna be able to go anywhere. 'Cause this is the only experience I have.

**KIER:** I didn't have a safety net. I don't know my father, my family that's remaining. I'm the strong family member. So people don't check on the strong family member because it's the assumption that you're doing well, even though you desperately need help and guidance because you young and you don't have your mom in the world, you don't have any parents.

**KIER:** And I looked at my surroundings and I wanted more, you know, I didn't like the apartment I was living in. I didn't like the job that I was working, I needed to focus on something different. And I think I started seeing more of the world. I moved from the hood. I moved to a part of upper Northwest called Columbia Heights where everybody ain't poor and black, there's multiple cultures and people who work really fascinating

jobs. And I started to see the world different, like the difference between Jay Z's first and second album. You can tell that he saw the world after Reasonable Doubt. And he was like, oh, shit there's more to the world than Brooklyn. I saw the world and it changed me.

**NICHOLE:** At the age of 22, four years after losing his Mom, Kier enrolls in college and his dreams of becoming a rapper start to change.

**KIER:** I didn't have space for that and working full-time and going to school full-time. It just, it melts it away. The passion for it. I also wasn't angry anymore. I wasn't as poor. I wasn't as lost. And I think a lot of my music was driven by my anger. Man.

**NICHOLE:** Kier enjoys his freshman year and why wouldn't he? He's funny, and charismatic, and outgoing, and he gets along well with everyone especially, the ladies.

**KIER:** I had the physical glow up in the 20s. Oh man. Cut my hair, had the waves, hit the gym, had the muscles, found a skincare routine. I wasn't an ugly kid in high school no more. The women were checking for me. Man, I came back for everything and everyone.

**KIER:** And it was a great time, I ain't gonna lie to you. But, I um, I grew up in a house with a survivor of sexual assault, and it's just, it's different when you grow up with those rules, like, you know, you can't just walk in your mom's room. You gotta knock on the door and announce yourself. She can't wake up and just see you standing over her. That changes the way you deal with women for life. You have a different understanding, especially as a man. I'm six foot one, I'm dark skinned. If I don't smile, I look like I'm about to slap you. You know, I got resting aggressive face, I know that.

**KIER:** So I'm very conscientious of where I am, how close I am to people in a room because of those things. I'm not saying I was perfect. It's not like I overly understood women or my life was easier, I didn't have conflict. But, um, I think it allowed me to just approach women with a lot more empathy and understanding.

**NICHOLE:** Seeing himself in these new experiences and relationships, make Kier curious about where he's from and how he came to be the way he is.

**KIER:** I'm really missing my mom. I have so many questions for her that will be forever unanswered. Little things that help me understand myself. My mom was a big fan of pistachios and mint chocolate chip ice cream, And the older I get, I find myself slipping into the things that she loved.

**KIER:** I don't know whether that's because I saw it and subconsciously it's just baking in the back of my head or whether it's because there's some type of genetic factor there and I'm falling into exactly what my DNA code says I'm supposed to. If that can be true

for mint chocolate chip ice cream and pistachios then perhaps that's true for the way I deal with my anger or the way I deal with my sadness or the way I deal with other people, the people I don't agree with.

**KIER:** And I wanted to know, I needed to figure that out. And I'm realizing that I have another living parent.

**NICHOLE:** Kier decides he's gonna find his father.

### **AD BREAK**

**NICHOLE:** Kier talks to his family and learns that one day his mother came home from college pregnant with him. And thrilled about it.

**NICHOLE:** She'd fallen in love with his father and made...some kind of an arrangement with this man despite him being married with children, to get pregnant and have Kier.

**NICHOLE:** His mom told him that his father is Nigerian and before she passed she told him the name of one of his sisters. And so in 2014, he looks her up on Facebook.

**KIER:** I wrote the script in a word. My name is Kier Gaines. Um, I'm looking for my father. This is his name. He has a daughter. This is her name from what I understand. If you could try to connect me or if any of this sounds familiar, please let me know. I never thought that anybody would respond to an unsolicited message from some random guy in the States looking for his father. It sounds... that is the scammiest sounding non-scam of all time.

**KIER:** There were hundreds of women that I messaged. And, uh, they all started getting back to me one by one. And the one that was actually my sister was the last one to reach back. Telling me my name. I mean, even the middle names that I left off, my mother's full name, which I never disclosed in the message, and my father's name. And she's like, "Wow, I can't believe you actually found me." And then a follow up message from my actual father.

**KIER:** The message was like, "Hello, Kier. I'm so glad that you reached out and you found me." And I said, "Wait, do you really know who I am?" And he says, "Of course I do. You're my son. I've been waiting for this message." And it felt like a scene from a movie. I think I might've got up from my computer and looked at it like, wait a minute, what's going on here?

**KIER:** And I re-read the message. And I sent it to a friend or two and everybody was like, "Wow. Like this is crazy." I'm like, yeah. This actually happened. We exchanged numbers. So we're talking on the phone, I'm feeling some sense of parental familiarity. I haven't been mothered in a very long time at this point and my dad doesn't feel like a parent, but it doesn't matter, you know? Just having that presence, knowing that someone that made you is still here on earth. I think you, it feels so...filling of a void that I just accepted. You know? It's, there's not emptiness in a slot anymore. And when you just happy to have something, me, at least, I have a tendency to ask less questions. You know, kind of like I don't look the gift horse in the mouth type deal.

**KIER:** So my dad decides I wanna see you, I'm gonna pay for your ticket and he's not a wealthy man. He's a working man at this time and he buys me a ticket.

**NICHOLE:** In August of 2014, Kier lands at a small airport in Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

**KIER:** And I walk out and there he is standing right there with his wife. My father and I look very much alike. The second I saw him, my first thought was, oh shit, that is my face. He was more handsome than I thought he'd be, shorter than me though. I smiled and I hugged him, which I don't think he expected that. I come from a huggy, kissy family, you know what I'm saying? I don't think he expected me to bear hug him. And then I looked at his wife and she has this big, bright smile. She has all these big white teeth in her mouth. She has really chunky cheeks and big dark eyes. And she reached her arms out with this big, bright, beautiful smile. Oh my God. And then she embraced me. And there's no weirdness.

**NICHOLE:** Kier gets in the car and for the first time in a decade, he rides home with a parent.

**NICHOLE:** Kier's father takes him around his village and proudly introduces him as his son.

**NICHOLE:** He meets his siblings, there are five of them, and they tell Kier that their Dad had been a great father to them.

**NICHOLE:** Over the course of the week the two take walks, and share meals, and travel together and Kier tries to get a better sense of who this man is.

**KIER:** The best way I can describe my father's demeanor is subdued excitement. He's more laid back than I am. A tremendous storyteller. He speaks in parables. Very religious, very close to God. He's, he's not, not warm. He has a warmth to him. My sister has told me. I said, like, yeah, he kinda mean, and they say, oh, he's a very old man. He wasn't always this way, which scared the shit out of me by the way 'cause I'm afraid I'm

gonna be like that too. But it wasn't. The best way I can describe him is not cold. But kind of rigid and super religious and slow moving, but very assertive and sure of himself.

**KIER:** And the more I talked to my father, the more I realized that we are both strong-minded men in opposite directions. We're not a lot alike in our ideologies and the expectations on both sides that don't fit. He's a proud Christian Nigerian man. Your son is supposed to be your child. You know, there's a level of respect that is expected. I grew up in the projects. I'm African American. I don't know you bruh.

**KIER:** When I got back from Nigeria, I realized that we did all of that talking, he and I, and he was able to walk away without having the hard question asked to him because it just didn't dawn on me while I was there. But I wish I asked him in that moment, "Why didn't you try a little bit harder to get in contact with me?"

**KIER:** I think I got the oh wow, golly, gee willikers out the way. Now I'm kind of pissed off and I have expectations for some answers.

**NICHOLE:** Kier decides to give his father a call. Now, ideally the conversation would be open and reflective.

**KIER:** He'd say something to the tune of, "Look, it was a confusing time. I was- you know, I was married. I had other kids. I could have looked for you harder, but I didn't, you know, I'm sorry about that." And then, skippidy-bo-bop-ba-da-ba-do-do-do-do-doom-bum-bum music plays, and then that's it. And I feel satisfied with the answer that I have. There is not a single fiber in my brain that felt like that was realistically gonna happen, but that was the ideal.

**KIER:** I called him. He said, "Hello, hey, how you doing?" And you know, all the formalities and I was like, "I gotta question, like what, what happened? Like, why don't, where was, why are we just now meeting each other?" And I think he was thrown off by the question. And he asked me to elaborate to which I did, and his answer was something in the vein of, "The past doesn't matter. What I know is that you're my son." And I was like, "No, it, it doesn't quite work that way. I think we need to have a conversation." And his reaction was very defensive. And he said something about giving it all to God. And it was so definitive. And so final the way he said it, even though I don't know this man for real, you know, he's still your parent, it's still that authoritative piece over you. And, um, I just kind of took it at that because I feel like if I gotta explain it, then the journey to helping us be on the same page is a little bit more walking than I'm willing to do. And uh it was defeating. It was defeating. It was deflating, but the empath in me understands, it goes, it goes back to the lived experience thing. It's easier for me to say, I'm sorry because I lived in a house where feelings were okay. He didn't, you know?

**KIER:** I think that this experience, just in terms of masculinity, really highlighted to me the importance of saying I'm sorry. And the importance of acknowledging your own



shortcomings and not feeling like you, you've lost power because you're acknowledging those things.

**NICHOLE:** Kier decides not to pursue more of a relationship with his father but the experience does give him perspective and it helps him add to his definition of how a good person, and by extension a good man, operates.

**NICHOLE:** They're empathetic. They own up to their mistakes and say I'm sorry. And they're not just loving, they're there.

**NICHOLE:** Shortly after this experience, Kier's ability to be that kind of person and man will be tested when he finds out he's gonna be a Dad.

### **AD BREAK**

**NICHOLE:** Kier graduates and in 2016 he gets a job as a college and career counselor at a school for students with behavioral challenges.

**KIER:** They had a staff of therapists, all Black women. And I'm thinking therapists look like, you know, the, the wool jacket with the elbow patches, "hmm yes, well yes, yes" very stiff, very rigid and nah, they came to work wearing Jordans and leggings. Seeing the change in those students after they saw those therapists was incredible.

**KIER:** These students were like the kids I grew up with. When you come from nothing, it does a lot to your brain. And it does a lot to the way that you process the words that people say to you. So the kids will come in my class, will come in my office on 10. It's like, oh, whoa, why you talking to me like that? Go and see, you know, go and see Miss Rhonda, or go and see Miss Megan, and they'll go and see her and he'll come back and maybe apologize, or maybe be reflective and I'm like, what magic are y'all doing in that room? And, uh, that was my introduction to therapy.

**NICHOLE:** Kier wants to do this too, especially for people from neighborhoods like his. And so he starts looking into how to become a therapist.

**KIER:** I just eventually started looking at schools and I found a program and I inched my way into applying and getting into it. And maybe my biggest hope for myself was that I'd be able to bridge the gap between where you are and what you can't see to some level of visibility that can help you change a few things so you can live a better life. And my mom, she wanted to be a social worker. I think that was her major in undergrad for a little bit. And then I ended up in the mental health field.

**NICHOLE:** Kier's path is more clear to him by 2017. He starts grad school to become a therapist and he gets serious with his girlfriend, a recent law school graduate named Noemie.

**KIER:** Noemie and I, we in the full throes of really being together. It's, it's, it's a thing. We got a title and all that. And it was going swell. We just spent a couple of days together and I left her house, went back to my house. Like, man, I'm gonna go get some sushi. And I went and got sushi and she gave me a call and I was like, "Hey, what's up?" She was like, "Hey, how you doing?" "I'm good. I just left you, I'm Gucci, what's good?" "Nothing. Where are you?" "I'm at sushi. What's wrong?" "Nothing. Where're you at?" "Oh Kier, I'm at your house right now. Um, I need to talk to you." "About what?" She says, "Uh, I- it's like..." And I tell her, "Spit it out." She says, "I'm pregnant." Man... the movie *Get Out*, when he goes into the sunken place, he's just falling into a void. That is, that is symbolic of the way that I felt in that moment. I'm mad and confused and terrified because I wasn't ready to have a kid. I just started grad school. And I- I- I just knew that this was, this was it. Damn. I finally figured it out, about to be a therapist and here come this baby. She pulls up, and knowing me, hops out of the car with the saddest face you have ever seen. Keep in mind. I'm like, she just graduated from law school. Didn't even take the bar yet.

**KIER:** And as she just finds out that she's pregnant. And I just gave her a hug. And I said, "We're going to be aight." I don't know why I said that, cause I ain't believe it. Everything after that is a blur of arguments and reconciliation. And I realized how much I really needed my mom.

**NICHOLE:** Now, that he's in school to become a therapist, Kier has access to counseling as part of his course requirements. So, 14 years after losing his mom, and shortly before Noemie gives birth, Kier goes to his first therapy session and gets help sorting through all of his emotions around the pregnancy.

**KIER:** It's such a unique experience when you get a girl pregnant because the world makes you focus on everybody, but you. You better take care of that girl. You better take care of that baby. You better take care of them responsibilities.

**KIER:** People completely going around my fear, my need for support to make sure that I'm not just another Black man not taking care of a baby. And the human part of me got completely ignored. And the desire for me to be responsible got the volume cranked up to 50. And that hurt, you know?

**KIER:** But I think that meeting my father solidified the idea in my head that you have to raise your children. Having them and loving them is not enough. You can love someone from a distance but it only moves the needle in their life so much. To be impactful, you have to be there and be present and be ready to make mistakes and be ready to apologize when you make those. And thank goodness for therapy because it bridged

the gap between that thought and the very real reality that I was scared and didn't know whether or not I could make any of that happen.

**KIER:** When my daughter Emery was born, um, so many conflicting feelings, but the one that's most salient is just this overwhelming awe that I created this little person who has 10 fingers and 10 toes, and she can open her eyes and make crazy adorable sounds. And I couldn't believe that I made it, like we made this thing together. I just feel so close to her. Uh, and there was just this, something in me that made me want to give a thousand percent effort just to give it the best shot.

**NICHOLE:** Kier's concerns that he could be just another Black man not taking care of his kids couldn't be further from his reality. He dives into being Emery's Dad and despite the stereotype studies show that's to be expected.

**NICHOLE:** The CDC released a report in 2013 stating that Black dads - whether they live with their children, or not - are more actively involved in their kids' lives than their counterparts of other races.

**CLIP: EMERY'S FIRST BIRTHDAY:** *That didn't go quite the way we thought it would. Emery had a complete and total meltdown towards the end of that photo shoot. She had icing...*

**NICHOLE:** Kier and Noemie start a vlog to document their parenting journey. At first the only people that watch are their friends and family but eventually more start to find and follow the channel, in particular young Black men.

**NICHOLE:** Meanwhile, Kier keeps working towards finishing grad school and becoming a therapist. Towards the end of his studies he takes a class taught by a professor he finds to be absolutely brilliant named Dr. Ottowan. The class is all about trauma and he's actually looking forward to it.

**KIER:** I'm like, aight bet, we 'bout to come in here and figure out how to help people through they trauma. Let's go. And on the first day she like, "Nah, we gonna help you deal with yours." And it's like, oh no, this ain't about me. It's about them. And, um, man, that class. Mm.

**KIER:** She helped me realize that with, if you don't fully understand your stuff in the genesis of the words that you say and the behaviors that you demonstrate and the feelings that come up inside of you, then you will try to heal someone and you won't be able to fully get them there because your stuff will then become a web.

**NICHOLE:** The themes of this class make it into a video he films in 2019 for their vlog. In it, he's on a walk holding Emery and reflecting on what he's learned about fatherhood and masculinity.

**CLIP: 2-YEAR OLD BIRTHDAY:** *And I'm starting to see a lot of young men, particularly young Black men, hit me up being like, "Yo, I can't wait to be a dad. I can't wait to be a father." And I love that because I think the men that were a generation before us, got raised by the men that were a generation before them. And those men didn't really know warm love because a man didn't express those things that way back then. But I think my generation of dads is doing a better job of being transparent. And I feel like I owe those young men to tell 'em, like, bro, this is hard. And it can be incredibly painful if you allow it to be. So before you take on a family, better go see somebody about your past. And go see somebody about the trauma that you've endured throughout the course of your life and start healing.*

**NICHOLE:** In 2020, the video goes viral. Kier, Noemie, Emery and later their second daughter, Sydney, are launched into the national spotlight.

**NICHOLE:** Videos of Kier with his girls being affectionate and silly, and encouraging of their emotional expression and apologizing when he's wrong, attract millions of views and comments.

**NICHOLE:** Kier gets invited to give talks, and speak on panels, and give some pretty high profile interviews.

**CLIP: ARCHIVAL OF OPRAH INTERVIEW:** *What's up brother K Brown? Hello Miss Oprah Winfrey. How y'all doing?*

*Aw, so great to see you. Fantastic man. We love the message you're putting out into the world. We heard you on the tape that how you grew up without your father present. So who helped raise you man?*

**NICHOLE:** That is the question that everyone always wants to know. How did he become this kind of a man without an example? But especially, how did he become this kind of a father? When we asked him he said he wasn't really sure and tried to guess at it, but with some nudging, he sees it.

**KIER:** Damn. Yeah, you right. I do parent exactly like my mom. Uh, I didn't realize that. Um, yeah, I don't think that a little boy like me gets raised where he was raised and exposed to the things that I was exposed to and still emerge with this sense of compassion and empathy for other people, you know, in this man's body, in this man's experience without a mother who made that the lynchpin of our relationship. Just positive regard and freedom of emotional expression.

**KIER:** But I don't think it's, it's conscientious as, this is what worked for me when I was a kid. This is my memory. And I want my daughter to have the same thing. I think it's just

embedded into who I am. Um, yeah I- I'm- I'm my mom, I'm my mom, I'm my mom, I'm my mom.

**KIER:** She used to do this thing where she would doodle patterns, I find myself doing that. She was a lactation consultant in, in poor neighborhoods and my wife breast fed my first daughter for 18 months. And, ooh we on six months of this, this one right here and it allows me to support her through the journey in a different way 'cause I just feel connected to that experience. It's little things man. It's funny when you a parent, you think it's all the big things you do that shape your children's personality. The- the- don't do this and don't do that. But it's, it's them watching you and watching how you operate in large part that really makes them who they are.

**KIER:** Your kids don't need a perfect parent, they just need a present one.

**TER:** Okay Kier. Yeah!

**TER:** So, is this the kind of man a boy becomes when his foundation is one where emotional expression is met with love? Where he's given the space and the place to be his whole self? Where his mother's guiding ideology was to be a good person, and by default a good man?

**TER:** How odd that I don't have the language to name the kind of man that I think Kier is without having to name it in opposition to something toxic.

**TER:** He has the trappings that could have created a particular kind of identity for Kier. His earliest examples were men defined by money, women, and power. He was also left with the hurt of unanswered questions for his parents. And then he had a physical glow up in his 20s, the waves, the muscles, the skincare routine, but Kier didn't let those things define him. He becomes a therapist, and he lives his life choosing growth and openness that offers a more expansive view of masculinity.

**TER:** In the space of self-discovery, he is faced with having to become a father without ever having been fathered. And on that blank canvas, he builds on the foundation his mother gave him; a foundation of honesty and warm love where emotional expression was encouraged.

**TER:** It just brings me back to the questions I asked at the beginning; What does it take to be a man? What does it take to be a Black man? Kier's life is offering perspective on these questions. Through his choice to be a therapist, a father, and a husband, he bridges the gap, especially for people like him, between where you are and what you can't see.

**TER:** How do we embolden our young and our grown up men and support them in discovering a diversity of manhood? A manhood that is not based on gender norms but instead based in humanity.

**TER:** I'm Tracee Ellis Ross and I hope you enjoyed meeting Kier Gaines as much as I did.

## **CREDITS**

I Am America is a co-production of Dear Media and Joy Mill Entertainment.

Executive Producer, Creator and Co-Writer is Tracee Ellis Ross.

Executive Producer, Showrunner, and Writer is me, Nichole Hill.

Executive Producer and Co-Writer is Adriana Ambriz on behalf of Joy Mill Entertainment.

Managing Producer is Aceel Kibbi on behalf of Dear Media. Sound design and engineering by Mitra Kaboli. Our theme song "Strum" is composed by Jessie Montgomery. Story editing is by Martina Abrahams Ilunga. Reporting and fact-checking by Siona Peterous. Production assistance by Daniel Gonzalez.

Clips Courtesy of the O Network.

Executive Producers are Brian Dobbins on behalf of Artists First, Jeff Berman and Brett Bouttier on behalf of Magnet Companies, and Jocelyn Falk, Paige Port and Michael Bosstick on behalf of Dear Media.