



Birmingham duo at center of campaign to erase schizophrenia's stigma (video)

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Justin McKinley (left) and Rico James are trying to educate the public about schizophrenia. (Mike Oliver/moliver@al.com)

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama -- Meet Justin and Rico.

Justin McKinley, 28, is a Pinson native and one of about 2.4 million adults in the U.S. living with schizophrenia.

Rico James, is a registered nurse who helps provide care to those with mental illness on the street.

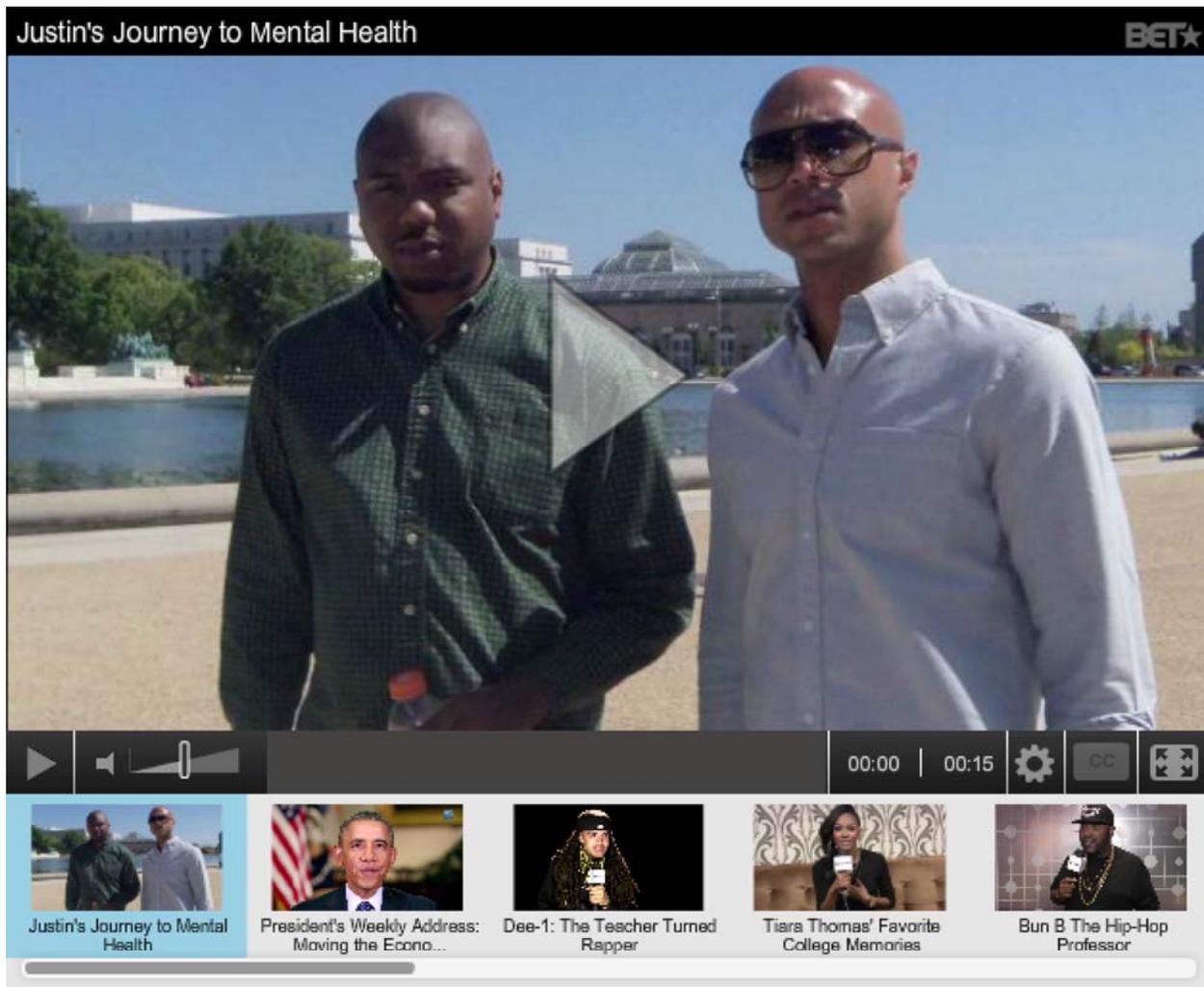
Together they are trying to get the word out. Mental illness can be treated and there are places to go for help.

"I was diagnosed in 2009," McKinley said. "I didn't believe anything was going on. But my friends noticed. I thought I was on top of the world. But I really needed help."

Today after being on the street and having been hospitalized six times, McKinley has found medication that works -- an injection he takes once a month. He lives independently in a Birmingham neighborhood.

The injectable drug worked so well for McKinley he became the "face of schizophrenia" featured in magazines advertisements and billboards for the drug's manufacturer Janssen Pharmaceuticals.

Justin and Rico spoke earlier this year at a panel discussion of the National Association of Black Journalists in Washington. Black Entertainment Television made a video.



"Justin is proof you can treat this and have a productive life," said Rico James, who works for the Jefferson-Blount-St. Clair Mental Health Authority.

James said the shutdown in the past few years of two psychiatric hospitals has heightened the importance of re-integration of those with mental illness back into communities.

"We are always afraid of the unknown," James said. "But when people see Justin and talk to others like Justin in the communities they overcome that fear."

An estimated 38,000 people may have schizophrenia in Alabama, including more than 1,600 in Birmingham.

Contact the Birmingham chapter of the National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI) at (262) 753-6264 for more information about schizophrenia and local support options.

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