

Next wave of black leaders finds fresh voice

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The Bay Area's Benjamin Jealous, who will become the youngest president in the history of the NAACP when he takes office in September, embodies a shift in the country's African American leadership.

African American leaders have typically ascended out of the church and the civil rights movement, while younger activists outside of those traditional paths have struggled to find success.

The times, they are a-changin'. The selection this month of Jealous, the 35-year-old Alameda resident and San Francisco foundation director, to lead the nation's oldest civil rights group underscores the dramatic nature of the change.

"There's been a real split, a generational split between people of my generation and the civil rights generation," said Van Jones, 39, an Oakland activist who founded or co-founded the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, ColorOfChange.org and Green For All. "This is the first step toward real healing."

Jones, as well as ColorOfChange.org co-founder James Rucker of San Francisco, are seen as part of the vanguard of the "hip-hop" generation. ColorOfChange.org has, in three years, emerged as a powerful online coalition that has galvanized the black community's attention on particular issues, such as the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the controversial prosecution of six black youths in Jena, La.

"There are folks who believe that to be a civil rights leader, you have to have strong ties to the church," said Rucker, 38. "I just don't think that is in touch with where things are today."

The younger generation is characterized, in part, by a fluency in technology, particularly when it comes to grassroots organizing. This generation turns to evolving forms of expression to characterize social issues, epitomized by hip-hop. And they've also had life experiences that would not have been possible without the achievements of the civil rights generation.

Some of them are activists, like the Bay Area's Jealous, Jones and Rucker.

Jealous is currently director of the Rosenberg Foundation, based in San Francisco, which works on issues such as improving the lives of low-income populations and immigrants. He's also been managing editor of the Jackson Advocate, a black newspaper, as well as executive director of the National Newspaper Publishers Association, a trade group representing more than 200 black community newspapers. For three years, he was director of Amnesty International's U.S. Human Rights Program.

An advertisement for Entertainment Weekly. It features a white card on a green stem with leaves. The card says "entertainment weekly" at the top, "50% off" in large letters, and "at participating restaurants, groceries, movies, and more!" below. A green button with "Order Now" is to the right. The background is blue with a grassy bottom. Text on the right says "Enjoy up to 50% off discounts in your neighborhood for restaurants, groceries, movies, and more!". The bottom right says "Offer expires 5/31/08". The Entertainment Weekly logo is at the bottom left.

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New-style leadership

But others in this category include politicians like the mayors of Newark (Cory Booker, 39), the District of Columbia (Adrian Fenty, 37) and Philadelphia (Michael Nutter, 50) as well as San Francisco District Attorney Kamala Harris, 43. Of course, the most prominent member of the emerging black leadership who defy the old-style preacher/civil rights politician-mold of black leadership is Sen. Barack Obama, 46.

While older generations had to fight to attend desegregated universities, many of the hip-hop generation's leaders have been educated in the Ivy League - including the Columbia University-educated Jealous, who is also a Rhodes Scholar. That has also meant a drastically different experience of racial injustice.

"Ben Jealous did not grow up in Jim Crow," said Prof. Eddie S. Glaude Jr., a Princeton University professor of African American studies. "He has no biographical experience of cities burning."

But the younger generation continually comes up against a leadership that frames issues in terms of past eras, Glaude said. It's a struggle that goes across America's racial lines, where Baby Boomers have a tendency to describe contemporary issues in terms of their yesteryear - whether it's the Vietnam War, the women's movement or civil rights.

Reframing debate

"The ways in which the debates were framed during that period continue to frame our public deliberations now," said Glaude, 39. "I think what we see among younger folk, those of us who came of age after that period, we are more open to different ways of approaching a problem and framing it."

Jealous has already signaled his intention to lead the 99-year-old NAACP in a process of reframing the debate.

Like others, Jealous indicated that the most pressing issues for him include the country's incarceration rate, particularly of African American men and boys, which far outpaces the rest of the world. Less than 5 percent of the world's people live in the United States, yet the nation has almost a quarter of the world's prisoners.

Jealous also spoke about segregated schools, employment discrimination and inner-city violence as pressing issues.

Jealous believes the NAACP's needs today are similar to the needs of the organization during its first 30 years, beginning in 1909. The early NAACP required an extensive effort to systematically document, organize and communicate the peculiar and particular forms of social injustice emerging in that era, Jealous said. By the time the civil rights era began, Jealous said, the black community had reached consensus on pressing issues.

He said the same is true today.

Jealous also believes that youth will play a pivotal role in documenting and telling the narrative of injustice, particularly as technology evolves.

Documenting abuses

As video recording equipment becomes cheaper and easier to use, Jealous said he hopes that the NAACP can lead an effort for more collaboratively documenting abuses. His model is the organization Witness, founded by the musician Peter Gabriel, which uses video and the World Wide Web to document human rights abuses. Jealous said that even technologies such as cell phones can be used in these ways.

"It may not feel like it, but the digital divide is narrowing rapidly," Jealous said at a teleconference for the black press. "We need to be there."

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