

G FORCE | VAN JONES

His collar is green

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Van Jones has made a national name for himself by finding one solution to three persistent problems: poverty, racial inequality, and the environmental crisis. He wants to solve these problems by creating green jobs filled by the poor and people of color - the groups often left behind during technological advances.

"If we can connect people who most need work," says Jones, a 40-year-old Yale Law School grad, "with the work that most needs to be done, then we can fight poverty and pollution at the same time."

Jones advocates his goals through his Oakland-based nonprofit Green for All and his bestselling book "The Green Collar Economy: How One Solution Can Fix Our Biggest Problem." He's developed an avid fanbase locally, speaking about green jobs at events held by the City of Cambridge, JFYNetWorks, the state Democratic convention, and Tufts University's Urban Environmental Policy Planning department.

The ever-busy Jones carved out a few minutes for an interview after getting off a red eye flight from California. He was in Washington to discuss with a member of President-elect Barack Obama's transition team the possibility of creating a clean energy corps comprising economically disadvantaged people who would retrofit and weatherize buildings. According to Jones, buildings contribute as much as 40 percent of carbon emissions. The idea dovetails with Obama's goal to create 3 million jobs, some of them green, to combat the economic crisis.

Jones considers Massachusetts among the most cutting-edge states dabbling in green jobs. In 2006, he became a mentor of Kalia Lydgate, who cofounded the Massachusetts Green Jobs Coalition, which successfully pushed to include green jobs for the disenfranchised into legislation the state passed last summer. Lydgate, who also works as a youth coordinator at Marion Institute, lauds Jones's ability to inspire her and others through his unique style. "He asks me the right questions so I can answer my own confusion," Lydgate says. "He doesn't feed me the answers; he draws them out of me."

Because of Massachusetts's progress in pushing a green jobs agenda, Jones says now he comes here to learn as much as he does to teach. This state, he says, will be in a superior position if the federal government under Obama decides to support these projects financially.

"Massachusetts is getting itself into a position that when other states are getting serious, it will be steps ahead as a technological leader and as a jobs leader," Jones says.

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