



NAACP's Ben Jealous: The Koch brothers did us a favor

The civil rights organization's youngest president discusses voter suppression and the perils of fighting the right

By Elizabeth Hines And Adele M. Stan

Benjamin Todd Jealous, president and CEO of the National Association for the Advancement Colored People, seems to be everywhere these days: there's hardly an issue embraced by the progressive community on which his name doesn't pop up.

Perhaps you saw him in the documentary, "Koch Brothers Exposed," pushing back against the billionaire Tea Party funders, and their bankrolling of attempts to roll back voting rights and to resegregate a school system in North Carolina. Or maybe you saw him on cable television, explaining the NAACP's support for marriage equality, or leading the charge to save the life of Troy Davis, an inmate put to death for a crime many believe he did not commit. Then there's the new NAACP report, co-produced with the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization and the Indigenous Environmental Network, issued on his watch, about the dangers of climate change and coal-fired power plants.

On the heels of an extraordinary triumph in the 2012 elections, when the NAACP organized its members to push back against an unprecedented, nationwide attempt to curtail the voting rights of African Americans, Jealous accepted the Puffin/Nation Prize for Creative Citizenship, a \$100,000 award for "challeng[ing] the status quo through distinctive, courageous, imaginative and socially responsible work of significance." Perry Rosenstein, president of the Puffin Foundation, and Andy Breslau, president of the Nation Institute, whose institutions award the prize jointly, both cited Jealous' deftness and passion for coalition-building across the progressive spectrum as a key factor in honoring the NAACP leader. It was the combination of Jealous' "moral clarity, sophisticated strategic thinking and effectiveness as a tactician" that sold Breslau on Jealous.

Jealous has pledged to use part of the prize as a college fund for De'Jaun Davis-Correia, the nephew of Troy Davis, and the rest as a college fund for his own children.

Given Jealous' current star power, it's easy to forget the skepticism with which many greeted his contentious election, at the tender age of 35, to the helm of the nation's oldest civil rights organization in 2008. At that time, beset with financial woes and an aging membership, the NAACP was commonly viewed as a staid organization whose relevance had passed. When Jealous swept in, it wasn't just a young face he brought to the organization, but a background in both journalism and human rights activism — he was managing editor of the Jackson Advocate and led Amnesty International's human rights division — and an academic résumé that includes degrees from Columbia University and Oxford, where he was a Rhodes scholar. He also brings the kind of multicultural background more common to his generation than any before it: his mother is black and his father is white.

Credited with bringing the organization out of the technological dark ages, the NAACP, under his leadership, now boasts more than 600,000 online activists. (And yes, you can follow him on Twitter.)

AlterNet Education Editor Elizabeth G. Hines and Washington Bureau Chief Adele M. Stan spoke with Jealous by phone the weekend before he was to receive the Puffin/Nation prize, first from the Atlanta airport as he dashed for a plane (his travel schedule changed abruptly, he said, when he realized he had time after an engagement, to catch a plane to read to his daughter), and then from his home in the Washington, D.C., area.

Adele M. Stan: Tell us what this prize means to you, and to the community you represent as leader of the NAACP.

Benjamin Todd Jealous: It's a deeply humbling validation that our work is important, and it's having great effect. And it's a sign that a return to our roots of coalition building, community organizing, and campaigning for social change on behalf of the most vulnerable, discriminated-against and voiceless people in our society.

AMS: The coalition-building you've been doing has attracted a lot of attention. For instance, many credit the NAACP's support for same-sex marriage as having real impact in the four states where referenda on the issue appeared on the 2012 ballot.

BTJ: Look, one of our mantras for a long time is “A threat to justice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” And another: “To have friends, you’ve got to be a friend.” And those have guided us in these times.

We are in a moment when the rights of many groups — the rights and protections that many groups have won throughout recent decades have come under assault — come under withering assault, all at once. We’ve seen attacks on a woman’s right to choose, attacks on people of color’s right to be included in educational institutions, attacks on the right to clean air and clean water, attacks on workers’ rights to organize — all happen all at once. And we’ve seen attacks on the notion that LGBT people are equals to everybody else on the planet. When that happens, we can either Balkanize or we can coalesce. We can decide that there’s strength in unity, that there’s power in coming together, and that we’re going to follow the motto of the Three Musketeers and say: “All for one and one for all.” And that’s always where I put my faith.

There are only two types of power, at the end of the day, in our society: organized money, and organized people. We have to be organized. And so, when we came into this moment, much of which was brought to us by the Koch brothers and the far-right institutions that they and their family have created, we decided that we had to really invest in re-strengthening old bridges that were built long before I arrived at the association, and we also had to be direct about our own need to help in very important battles like ending racial profiling, ending the death penalty and saving voting rights in this country.

And it’s paid off. I mean, we saw 35 LGBT organizations come together at the Stonewall Inn to stand up with the NAACP and the National Action Network and SEIU and call for an end to racial profiling, and we saw the NAACP play a critical role in multiple states in defending marriage equality. Quite frankly, at the end of the day, we’re all the children of Bayard Rustin, one of our greatest organizers, taught us to do, and, frankly, it’s what Shirley Chisholm admonished us to do: At the end of the day, to really focus on those common interests and to push the ball forward, and that’s what we’re trying to do.

Elizabeth G. Hines: I’m struck by the degree to which you’ve brought or maintained a strong focus, at the NAACP, on the issue of education. It appears to me that on this issue, there are many places where much of what you’re talking about comes together — workers’ rights, the work that you did in North Carolina in Wake County [to push back against re-segregation], and the lawsuit you’ve launched against New York City, challenging barriers to admission of African-Americans to the elite public schools.

BTJ: In Washington, D.C., this week, we'll be launching our comprehensive education agenda, the first K-12 education reform agenda we've put forward, really, since *Brown v. Board of Education*. We sought to rise above the fray and just define what a good education looks like these days: What are the best schools in any county doing? What defines them? And we found four things: They invest in teaching as a career. They really prize having high-quality teachers in every single classroom. They give kids more time and ways to learn. Extend the school day, extend the school year, but you also do that by bringing back arts education — and wood shop, even — again, appealing to all the different kids' learning styles. Thirdly, you invest more resources in the kids who need the most help. You see kids like people see investment portfolios: the ones who are going on all cylinders, you help them keep on going, and the ones who are lagging, you invest a bit more to get them up to speed. And, finally, you make sure kids show up to kindergarten ready to learn; you invest in universal pre-K. But education for us is primary. It's where we started. It was the focus of Dr. [W.E.B.] Du Bois' first investigation, it was the subject of the first grant application we ever wrote, in 1911, to the New York Foundation. It has been our longest campaign and it is, most frankly, the one where we still have the most that we aspire to do.

AMS: Do you think it's the toughest fight, still?

BTJ: Here we are, 58 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, and it's not clear that *Brown v. Board* has worked. Let me put it this way: It is clear that *Brown v. Board* has worked for every other industry. I'm flying on a plane right now, and this plane is desegregated because of *Brown v. Board*. But it's not clear that *Brown v. Board* has succeeded for all of our children in most communities. And the reason that we focus on children is because, at the end of the day, the movement has always been about our children.

The first slave rebellion in Virginia in 1663, what spurred it was a decree that children of Irish indentured servants and the children of African slaves would have the same status as their parents, that the children would be trapped in their parents' present condition. And from that day forward, the movement for freedom and justice in this country has been principally focused on creating a better day for our kids. And education is central to our success in that effort.

EGH: In that vein, let's talk about youth and youth engagement. For my grandparents and their peer group, being involved in and supporting the NAACP went without question — you were involved in this organization because it was really the difference between life and death in so many cases. For my mother's generation that was starting to change a little bit. I'm in my late thirties, and I would say, for my cohort of folks, the

organization hasn't necessarily had quite the same traction — and possibly even less for those who are very young. How is the NAACP working to bring young people into the organization, and build coalitions of young people who can and are willing to stand up and talk about these issues, whether it's educational opportunity, voter suppression, or whatever it may be?

BTJ: You know, when it comes to our youngest activists of any generation, it's always a question of whether people are raised with the expectation that they'll be involved in the movement, and will need to fight for their rights and those of others, or whether the members of that generation will have to decide to opt in on their own accord. And, for many families, for generations throughout the early-to-mid-20th century, it was a clear expectation.

My family has belonged to the NAACP for six generations, if you count my children — five through me. And for the first four, it was just understood that part of your responsibility as a person growing up in this country was to be part of the struggle for civil and human rights. When my mom was 14, she desegregated her high school in Baltimore, and then spent the summer with her grandmother, desegregating churches in southern Virginia.

My father comes from an old New England family who fought in the Civil War, were suffragettes, fought in the Revolutionary War, and actually fought against the Salem Witch Trials, way back in his family. And, similarly, he was involved at a very young age in both anti-war activities and civil rights activities. Early in his 20s, he was one of the few white men to go to jail in Baltimore for desegregating that city's lunch counters and central business district.

But when my generation showed up in the early '70s, it was a different equation. Our parents sincerely believed that they had slain the last of the big dragons, just as their grandparents and great-grandparents had overturned slavery, they and their parents had been involved in overturning segregation, and therefore they reasonably had hope that our generation would be the first to truly be judged by the content of our character and not the color of our skin, or what group or what neighborhood our mama came from. And so we were presented the struggle as a choice — something you can do, something that might be good for you to do, but not something you had to do. What do you have to do? You need to study hard, keep your nose out of trouble and, above all else, reap what we have sown. Take advantage, full advantage, of the opportunities we have created for your generation.

By the time I was in college, it was pretty clear that that had worked for many black people in my generation, but it probably hadn't worked for most. We were,

by then, the most incarcerated generation on the planet, the most murdered generation in the country — and in the midst of a multi-generational recession.

A lot of our work today is about empowering parents and teachers and pastors and other community leaders to present that choice to young people in a way that's compelling. Part of what makes the NAACP strong — it's always made the NAACP strong — is that we are a bit like public television. We reach out to both generations, if you will, that are the most likely to see themselves as having disposable time and being eager to change the world — that being those who are school-age, and those who are retirement age. And so, like public television, it's common to have a relationship with us when you're very young, and then to tune out for a while, and then to tune back in when you're raising kids and own a home and more settled. So, we're active on 300 campuses across the country — roughly, half high school, half college. We also have junior youth councils that have young people as young as eight years old in them.

The issues that excite young people are quite frequently specific injustices, be it the Scott sisters, Troy Davis, Treyvon Martin, because, quite frankly, they're often at the threshold of committing to a life of activism. And the doorway into great causes is usually a grave injustice. People commit to abolishing the death penalty because they fought to save an innocent man named Troy Davis — or, 50 years ago, for our parents' generation, a guy named Caryl Chessman. They see the state execute a man who they believe did not commit the crime for which he was executed, and they realize that it's a much bigger problem. And they also realize, given the success at drawing attention to this case, and the success at pushing everybody from the former director of the FBI and Kim Kardashian, to speak out against it, that they can have an impact.

One of the beauties of the NAACP...is that we give young people real leadership opportunity at a very young age. If you look at Jotaka Eaddy, who's an organizer in her early 30s on our staff, who is being honored this year, given one of the highest awards by the Midwest Academy, one of the great schools for organizing in the country. Jotaka was active in the NAACP by the age of 14. By the age of 16, she decided that she was going to dedicate her life to abolishing the juvenile death penalty and, by the age of 25, she was the organizer in this country most responsible for achieving that goal.

AMS: Does that mean that the future of fighting back against mass incarceration and the death penalty rests with the very young people?

BTJ: Oh, absolutely. And, frankly, the future of voting rights rests with the young people. Our biggest battles are always multi-generational.

What has distinguished the NAACP for 103 years is that we explicitly refuse to think in terms of: "What can we accomplish in the next three years? Or five years?" I mean, obviously, we have those conversations, but that's not, for us,

like, our strategic plan. Our strategic vision is: “What absolutely has to change?” And our commitment is: We will focus on that until we achieve the goal. And that means that we have a great batting average, because we’re literally willing to fight until we win.

That was our approach to ending lynch-mob justice, that was our approach to ending segregation, that is our approach to abolishing the death penalty. That is our approach, as perilous as it often seems, to getting to a place where, finally, every child in this country will have access to a great education. And that is our approach to ending mass incarceration. And I should say that it was our approach to securing voting rights, and it will be our approach now that they’ve come under massive assault.

So, that’s why we train young people — because Jotaka’s far from unique. If you ask yourself, why was Magic Johnson, one of the most successful athletes to go from being a jock to being a business leader, he’ll tell you, you can’t explain that entirely without explaining the fact that he was president of his [NAACP] youth council for seven years in Lansing, Michigan. If you talk to people who were active in SNCC [the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] about where most of the SNCC leadership — like Julian Bond, like Jesse Jackson — got their training, they’ll tell you they all rose out of the NAACP youth councils, especially on the black side of the SNCC equation. If you talk to people who knew Rosa Parks, they will tell you that she rose up through her youth council, and so it is for Donna Brazile, for Roland Martin and, frankly, as it was for me.

This year, at the NAACP, I helped lead an effort that succeeded in registering 432,000 people [to vote]. When I was 13 and 14 years old in 1986 and ’87, I was part of a voter registration drive intended to get people organized in time for the 1988 primaries, and Jesse Jackson’s second run [for the Democratic presidential nomination], and we registered 2,000 people. The people who trained me were the local NAACP leadership, who were my heroes, growing up in Monterey County, California. So that’s what we’ve done for a century.

What’s exciting now is that our biggest membership increases are among young people. And what’s also exciting is this transformation that we’ve had online, where we’ve brought in a half million new activists online. We started at 175,000; now we’re at 675,000. [Many] are the young professionals; for the first time, we’ve succeeded in filling the donut in getting people to be active in every generation in this country in significant numbers — from our youth councils all the way up to our retirees, who tend to lead many of our traditional branches — but with a huge number of young professionals online and, increasingly, we’re seeing those young professionals take over leadership of the local branches, as it transitions.

Here in Washington, D.C., the entire executive council is under 42 years old. Again, that's because, for a long time, we've trained young people and, in recent years, through our investment in online activism, have also made the NAACP more accessible or more relevant to young professionals, as well.

AMS: With the election being just past, the attempts at voter suppression we saw from the right are still very fresh in our readers' minds. Until election night, I'm not sure people understood the extent of the organizing the NAACP and the voter protection groups had done.

BTJ: Yeah, well, and are doing. We have to understand that, for most of us, this is a new type of wave of voter suppression that we are dealing with. While most of us have become accustomed to dealing with is the far right wing breaking the law to suppress the vote. What we are less familiar with is their using the law to suppress the vote [as they're doing now].

They've been out there for over a decade trying to pass these voter ID laws in various places; they finally had a breakthrough in the wake of the Tea Party. And now we are dealing with them having successfully reactivated a playbook last used, to great effect, in the decades after the Civil War. So we should understand our history here: In the last year, we saw more states pass more laws pushing more voters out of the ballot box than we've seen in any year in the past century. A century ago, it was the tail end of a wave of legislative assaults on the right to vote that began over 40 years before that; it began in 1868 and it ended in the 1910s.

AMS: So you're saying this could be the tip of the spear if left unchecked.

BTJ: Yeah — exactly. The game has changed; the game has changed permanently, as far as present generations are concerned. We have to raise young activists to understand that no matter what you think your greatest passion is, what issue you are most excited about, voting rights is ultimately more important than that in a democracy. Because the right to vote is the right upon which your ability to defend or extend all of your other right is leveraged. If somebody succeeds in diminishing your voting power, they have just made it easier to defeat all of your other aspirations for moving the civil and human rights struggle, and the environmental forward in this country, the labor struggle forward in this country.

We are going to have to back to basics with ourselves, and with the rising generation of leadership in our country, and really make sure that folks understand that every year, we're going to have to be prepared to repel legislative assaults on the right to vote, until we finally succeed at truly securing voting as an absolute protected right in this country — because, while we think of it as such, it is not so secured in our Constitution or in our Bill of Rights.

AMS: Were you surprised to see people stand on line for seven hours and stick it out, or did you expect to see that?

BTJ: Actually, no. By the time election day came, that was what I expected. We had spent a year, at that point, organizing people, educating people, getting them to focus on just how sacred their vote was. And the Koch brothers, ironically, did us a big favor, because they just repeatedly kept assaulting people's right to vote, and the institutions that they fund were just absolutely rabid in seeking to diminish an entire community's voting strength. And when you do that, it's sort of like repeatedly trying to steal somebody's old, rusty bicycle out of their front yard — they probably didn't even see it anymore, but now that they see someone consistently reaching over the fence, trying to grab it, all of a sudden they decide it's much more valuable than they realized. That's where we were on election day; people had seen their right to vote assaulted across the country multiple times, and they understood in their gut that the future of the country was in their hands. And they needed to get to the ballot box and cast their vote no matter what.

AMS: One of the things you talk about more than many progressive leaders is the issue of mass incarceration.

EGH: And with the NAACP's emphasis on education, I imagine you see that as a related issue.

BTJ: We see the both of them as very connected. State budgets are increasingly forcing our country to come to grips with the fact that we are the world's leading incarcerator at a rate that is as unsustainable as it is profane.

We have 5 percent of the world's people; we have 25 percent of the world's prisoners. And yet you'd be hard-pressed to find an American who really believes that their neighbors, their fellow citizens, their fellow Americans are five times more evil than the average group of Americans on earth. What is more real is that we've come to see incarceration as a panacea.

While incarceration continues to be socially downstream from education — getting locked up is something that typically happens later in your life and, most frequently, after you've had a failed experience with our educational system — incarceration is now financially upstream.

In California, when I was a kid, we spent 3 percent of the state budget on prisons and incarceration, and 11 percent of the state budget on public universities and higher education. Today in California, they spend about 11 percent of the state budget on prisons and incarceration, and about 7.5 percent on public universities and higher education...And so, literally, every student in the UC system, the CalState system, the community college system, is now subsidizing the cost of incarcerating a huge percentage of their generation.

To put it more succinctly, when I ask the president of Penn State, before the Joe Paterno scandal, what his biggest problem was, he said, "I've got the same big

problem every year: trying to fight to keep so much money from goin' to the state pen so just a little bit of it can come to Penn State.”

And so, increasingly, we're succeeding in building a movement, a broad-based, diverse, wide-ranging set of people into a movement for common sense in this country. We released a report called *Misplaced Priorities* on this tension, on the way in which our nation continues to allow people's fear of other people's children to trump their love for their own. And standing with me was Grover Norquist [president of Americans for Tax Reform, a major anti-tax group] and the head of the nation's largest prison union on the right, and the ACLU and the U.S. Students Association on the left. And Newt Gingrich endorsed the entire report in a two-page, very passionate letter. It's actually set up a situation where we are having increasing success with Republican governors in getting them to support a shift from failed tough-on-crime policies to proven, effective smart-on-crime policies that Democrats have been afraid to do for more than four decades.

And our best friend in fighting mass incarceration in many Southern states has turned out to be the Tea Party who, between their libertarians, Christian conservatives and their fiscal conservatives have often been able to have the courage to look at this issue and come to a very similar conclusion, which is that, for instance, non-violent, low-level drug offenders are the biggest cohort, or one of the biggest cohorts in virtually every prison system in the country, and treatment has proven seven times more effective, dollar for dollar, than incarceration, then we should just go on and do it, because it's the moral thing, it's the humane thing and it's the financially sensible thing to do. I think the future of fighting mass incarceration is about the left and the right in this country — groups that range from the NAACP and the ACLU on one side, to the Tea Party and the Cato Institute on the other — having the courage to sit down with each other and actually admit that they actually agree on something for once.

AMS: One of the uncomfortable challenges facing the progressive movement is structural barriers within the movement itself to racial diversity in the leadership of progressive organizations. How does that get fixed?

BTJ: Look, what is best about our progressive movement, and what makes it strongest, is much of it is bottom-up; it springs out of where people live, where they go to school, where they work. And our country, in addition to having a history of segregation, is in the midst of a massive wave of re-segregation. And so, I think that we just kind of have to start there.

People start their day in a workplace or school, and people go to temple, synagogue, mosque, church to pray in very race-segregated environments. And those three things — where you're rooted, where you work, and where you

practice your faith are at the foundation of people's entry into the progressive movement.

With that said, we are positioned for real change as the Baby Boomers turn over leadership. And we've begun to see it in the labor movement, and we've begun to see it throughout the non-profit progressive community, the NGO sector and we're beginning to see it in politics, as well.

The Baby Boomers will go down as a path-breaking generation that also held onto leadership in many institutions for a remarkably long period of time. As that transition is happening — sometimes by fate, sometimes by the force of insurgent movements — you'll see greater diversity because, quite frankly, for those following in the wake of the Baby Boom generation, there's a lot of opportunity. They were an extremely large leadership cohort on the left, and they leave a bunch of institutions that they've created, and so it's very much demand meeting up with supply.

The challenge is always for progressive institutions to be courageous enough to admit to themselves that diversity is something that they have to be very intentional about. And yet, it's as simple as welcoming and accepting new leaders and members on their own terms. I remain hopeful. I remain concerned about how segregated our society is, but I remain hopeful that the leadership ranks will continue to diversify, in large part because we do have a diversity of well-trained leaders.