

Young Activist Leaders Struggle To Be Heard

By Artelia C. Covington
NNPA National Correspondent

WASHINGTON (NNPA)- When Markel Hutchins approached the microphone last month on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to speak at the March on Washington, the 26-year-old speaker reminded many in the audience of another young orator who had appeared there 40 years earlier. In fact, he even sounded a little like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

"I remember walking up to the podium feeling very excited and also feeling like I had this heavy burden to bear," Hutchins says. "I prayed with Bernice King just before I got up to give my speech and I just felt that God would use me to speak to the nation."

He was used, delivering what was arguably the most inspirational speech of the day. However, instead of being applauded by his movement mentors, he was castigated.

"A very prominent national leader cursed me with everything he could think of the day before I got up to give my speech," Hutchins recalls. "He basically asked me who I thought I was and that I didn't have any right and had no foundation to speak from."

It was a cruel lesson in movement politics for anyone who believes the torch of leadership should be passed to the next generation.

Hutchins explains: "Our elders have fought us tooth and nail and, frankly, it hurts," he acknowledges. "We get knocked down and told that it isn't our time and they tell us to wait, but I'm not waiting because I know that God raises up leaders, not these men," he says.

Jamal Bryant, pastor of the Empowerment Temple in Baltimore, says youth should borrow a page from today's movement leaders.

"I think it is up to us as youth to rub our own sticks together and start our own flame," says Bryant. "No one passed the torch to King or to Jesse [Jackson], and we can't expect someone to pass it to us either."

Hutchins, president and chief executive officer of the Atlanta-based National Youth Connection Inc., knows that from his study of history.

"It was really the youth who ran the Civil Rights Movement, and I plan to do the same thing," he says.

Judging by the poor attendance at the last March on Washington, perhaps someone else should have been placed in charge of organizing it.

"I was embarrassed to see the March on Washington's anniversary," Bryant says. "To me it was a class reunion-it was nothing to really make a deposit to where we are. It was just a rehashing of where things have been."

Prior to forming his own church, Bryant, 32, was youth membership coordinator for the NAACP for five years.

"They had 2,000 people in 2003, which is 10 percent of what they had in 1963-all we can say now at this point is that maybe Spike Lee will make a movie just like he did with 'Get on the Bus,' and maybe we could get more people interested in it," he says.

Otis Moss III, 32, pastor of Tabernacle Baptist Church in Augusta, Ga., agrees that if young people want to become leaders in the Civil Rights Movement, there will be some inevitable tension.

"Historically, when we talk about this torch being passed, it is up to the younger generation to snatch it and say it's time for another voice to be heard and ministers like Bryant are a good example of that," he says. "Bryant and others are able to



Alise Barrymore, dean of ministries at North Park University in Chicago, says she has had "wonderful mentors."

reach a larger and younger generation in a way that the civil rights leaders of our day cannot."

Kirk Clay, 31, deputy director of the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation in Washington, D.C., says being young isn't the only criteria for being an effective leader.

"If your hands aren't strong enough to hold it up so that others can get the light that radiates from it then you should let us help you identify ways to get the light brighter so that it might benefit everyone who is in darkness," he says. "We need to make sure that the person carrying the torch is doing what they are supposed to be doing."

Not all young torch-bearers have been snubbed by their elders. Alise Barrymore, 34, dean of ministries at North Park University in Chicago, is an example.

"I've had the benefit of

having some wonderful mentors in that I saw from them ministry that was done well, that was inclusive and intelligent. So I feel that I also have been able to do what I have done in the ministry for those women who's voices maybe don't get heard because they don't have the benefit of being a popular name," she says.

Julian Bond, 63, chairman of the board for the NAACP, has observed the movement from the perspective of a young activist in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and now as a senior statesman.

"I was associated with SNCC and between 1960 and 1963; we had already established ourselves as equals," Bond recalls. "The only time my age ever came into question was when they handed out responsibilities-- I ended up passing out

the drinks to the movie stars who came to march and Sammy Davis Jr., told me thanks, kid, for the drink I passed him."

Bond says that the very fact that there were youth leaders who spoke at the most recent march is proof that their voices are being heard.

"I think it's artificial to say that there is a passing of the torch," he says. "No one ever passed the torch to me. I mean this is not a relay race where one passes leadership to another. And just like every other facet of life, if you expect some one to just pass it to you, then you've got another think coming."

Bond argues that age is overrated.

"This youth-versus -older-generation phenomenon is an old thing and it's always been with the younger sect pushing the elders and you shouldn't think that simply because you are young, that it qualifies you for something. That's not true if you are young and it's not true if you are old," he says.

Jesse Jackson, in his speech at the anniversary of the March on Washington, appeared to take a swipe at young leaders trying to assert themselves.

"There was a song we used to sing called 'Which Side are You On?' and it is not about your age, that which you cannot determine, but about what team you are on and what direction you are going," he said. "Are you with an older Thurgood Marshall or a younger Clarence Thomas? Are you with an older Franklin Roosevelt or a younger George W. Bush? Are you with an older Nelson Mandela or a younger Mangosuthu Buthelezi or Jonas Savimbi?"

Now that he is older, Jackson seems to forget some of the criticism he faced as a youth eager to create his own following.

In Ralph David Abernathy's autobiography, "And the Walls

Came Tumbling Down," (Page 425), he recounts a staff meeting in which Jesse Jackson, Andy Young and James Bevel were arguing against launching a "Poor People's Campaign."

Writes Abernathy, "Jesse had taken the floor and was enumerating all the reasons why Martin's [King] Poor People's Campaign would never work, why we should try something entirely different. Once again that morning he went on at great length and I could tell that Martin was getting more and more restless. Finally, without saying anything in response to Jesse, he got up, walked over to the chair where I was sitting, and said, 'Ralph, give me my car keys.'"

Abernathy said after he and King walked out on the balcony, Jesse Jackson followed them.

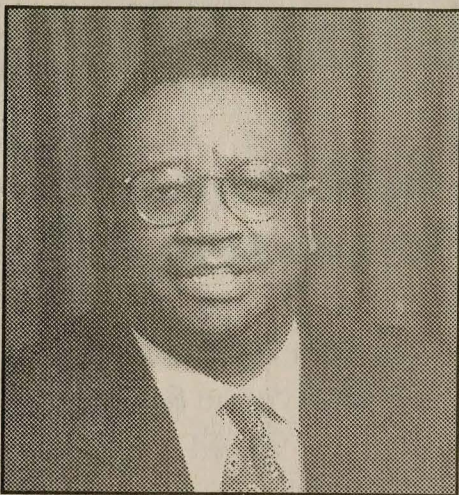
"Doc," he called out. Martin whirled and glared at him. 'Jesse,' he barked, 'it may be necessary for you to carve out your own individual niche in society. But don't you bother me.' Such an outburst was uncharacteristic of Martin and Jesse was stunned. His mouth fell wide open and for the one of the few times in his life, he was speechless."

Hutchins says he, too, was speechless after being upbraided by some of his mentors.

"If I ever become despondent it's not because of the death threats I receive on a daily basis. It's that the elders attack us," he says. "A couple of my elders got back up behind me and assaulted me publicly and their speeches were very anti-young people coming up and taking up leadership and you would think that they would have said good job or we appreciate what you have done. But what was said was that it wasn't about age-it's about agenda."

Hutchins says older civil rights leaders may have a monopoly on age - but not ideas.

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University of Washington To Lead Regional Center for America's Bioterrorism Research

Senator Murray's Efforts to Fund Bioterror Preparedness Pay Off for Washington State

Washington, D.C.-- U.S. Senator Patty Murray (D-Wash) announced that the University of Washington has been selected to become a new regional center for bioterrorism research. UW is one of eight new Regional Centers of Excellence named by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Each center will conduct research to assist national, state, and local public health efforts in the event of a bioterrorism emergency.

Each regional center will receive about \$40 million in grants over the next five years. The University of Washington will receive its first grant of \$4,440,215 to cover the program's first six months.

"I'm thrilled that the University of Washington will

play a leading role in helping our nation mount a strong defense against the threat of bioterrorism," Murray said. "UW has a tradition of excellence in cutting-edge research and has earned a place in the coordinated, research-based response to bioterrorism which I've been advocating in the Senate."

Since September 11th, Congress has focused in increasing our nation's biodefense research to ensure that we are prepared for a bioterrorist attack. As a member of the Senate Health, Education, Labor & Pensions Committee and the Senate Labor, Health & Human Services

(LHHS) Appropriations Subcommittee, Murray has worked to fund critical biodefense research. Senator Murray raised this issue at several hearings on bioterrorism preparedness and urged the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to develop research criteria and to disseminate this information to first responders and public health officials. She has consistently urged greater research efforts in developing new, safe vaccines, therapies and treatments. These new research centers will increase our commitment to bioterrorism preparedness and will help us develop effective and safe treatments to prepare for and

respond to this deadly threat.

Senator Murray also helped draft S. 1715 the Bioterrorism Preparedness Act of 2001, which was signed into law in June 2002. This legislation urges greater research and development of effective, safe biodefense strategies. As a member of LHHS, she has worked to increase funding for NIH to support this important research. In the past five years, Murray has worked to double NIH funding. The increased focus on bioterrorism research and strengthening of public health can also improve our response to infectious disease threats like SARS and West Nile.

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