

# NATIONAL URBAN LEAGUE CONFERENCE 2003



**RUTH STANDISH BALDWIN**  
A founder of the  
National Urban League

Playing a pivotal role in the 20th century Freedom Movement, the National Urban League grew out of that spontaneous grass roots movement for freedom and opportunity that came to be called the Black Migration.

When the U.S. Supreme Court declared its approval of segregation in the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision—the brutal system of economic, social and political oppression the white South quickly adopted—it rapidly transformed what had been a trickle of African-Americans northward into a flood.

Those newcomers to the North soon discovered they had not escaped racial discrimination. Excluded from all but the most menial of jobs in the larger society, victimized by poor housing and education and inexperienced in the ways of urban living, many lived in horrific social and economic conditions.

Still, in the degree of difference between South and North lay opportunity, and that African-Americans clearly understood.

But to capitalize on that opportunity, to successfully adapt to urban life and to reduce the pervasive discrimination, they would need help. That was the reason the Committee on Urban Conditions Among Negroes was established on Sept. 29, 1910 in New York City. Central to the organization's founding were two remarkable people: **Ruth Standish Baldwin** and **Dr. George Edmund Haynes**, who would become the committee's first executive secretary.

Baldwin, the widow of a railroad magnate and a member of one of America's oldest families, had a remarkable social conscience. She was a stalwart champion of the poor and disadvantaged.

Haynes, a graduate of Fisk University, Yale University and Columbia University (he was the first African-American to receive a doctorate from that institution), felt a compelling need to use his training as a social worker to serve his people.

A year later, the Committee merged with the Committee for the Improvement of Industrial Conditions Among Negroes in New York (founded in New York in 1906), and the National League for the Protection of Colored Women (founded in 1905) to form the National League on Urban Conditions Among Negroes. In 1920, the name was later shortened to the National Urban League.

The interracial character of the League's board was set from its first days. **Professor Edwin R.A. Seligman** of Columbia University, one of the leaders in progressive social service activities in New York City, served as chairman from 1911 to 1913. Baldwin held the post until 1915.

The fledgling organization counseled Black migrants from the South, helped train Black social workers and worked in various other ways to bring educational and employment opportunities to Blacks. Its research into the problems Blacks faced in employment opportunities, recreation, housing, health and sanitation and education spurred the League's quick growth. By the end of World War I, the organization

## History of the National Urban League

had a staff of 81 working in 30 cities.

In 1918, **Eugene Kinckle Jones**—who would direct the agency until his retirement in 1941—succeeded Haynes.

Under his direction, the League significantly expanded its multifaceted campaign to break down the barriers to Black employment, spurred first by the boom years of the 1920s, and then, by the desperate years of the Great Depression.

Efforts at reasoned persuasion were buttressed by boycotts against firms that refused to employ Blacks, pressure on schools to expand vocational opportunities for young people, the constant prodding of Washington officials to include Blacks into **President Franklin D. Roosevelt's** New Deal recovery programs and a drive to get Blacks into previously segregated labor unions.

With World War II looming on the horizon, **Lester Granger**, a seasoned League veteran and crusading newspaper columnist, succeeded Jones.

Outspoken in his commitment to advancing opportunity for

African-Americans, Granger pushed tirelessly to integrate the racist trade unions, and led

the League's effort to support **A. Philip Randolph's** March on Washington Movement to

fight discrimination in defense work and in the armed services.

Under Granger, the League, through its own Industrial Relations Laboratory, had notable success in cracking the color barrier in many defense plants. The nation's demand for civilian labor during the war also helped the organization press ahead with greater urgency in its programs to train Black youths for meaningful blue-collar employment.

After the war, those efforts expanded to persuading Fortune 500 companies to hold career conferences on the campuses of Negro colleges and place Blacks in upper-echelon jobs.

Of equal importance to the League's own future sources of support, Granger avidly supported its volunteer auxiliary, the National Urban League Guild, which, under the leadership of **Mollie Moon**, became an important national force in its own right.

The explosion of the Civil Rights Movement provoked a change for the League, personi-



**VERNON E. JORDAN JR.**

fied by new leader, **Whitney M. Young Jr.**, who became executive director in 1961. A social worker like his predecessors, he substantially expanded the League's fund-raising ability—and, most critically, made the League a full partner in the Civil Rights Movement.

Although the League's tax-exempt status barred it from protest activities, it hosted—at its New York headquarters—the planning meetings of **Randolph, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.**, and other civil rights leaders for the 1963 March on Washington.

Young was also a forceful advocate for greater government and private sector efforts to eradicate poverty. His call for a domestic Marshall Plan, a 10-point program designed to close the huge social and economic gap between Black and white Americans, significantly influenced the discussion of the Johnson administration's War on Poverty legislation.

Young's tragic death in 1971 in a drowning incident off the coast of Lagos, Nigeria, brought another change in leadership. **Vernon E. Jordan Jr.**, formerly executive director of the United Negro College Fund, took over as the League's fifth executive director in 1972 (the title of the office was changed to president in 1977).

For the next decade, until his resignation in December 1981, Jordan skillfully guided the League to new heights. He oversaw a major expansion of its social service efforts, as the League became a significant conduit for the federal government to establish programs and deliver services to aid urban



NEW PITTSBURGH COURIER FILE PHOTO

**POWER BROKERS**—Whitney M. Young Jr., left, with Black power brokers of the '60s in conference with President John F. Kennedy and Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson. Other Black leaders shown are Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.; A. Philip Randolph, organizer of the March on Washington; and Roy Wilkins, head of the national NAACP.

## Time to move from exclusion to inclusion

### Young speaks to 1961 NUL Conference

"America's Negro citizens are not resigned to accepting conditions of poverty. In all the major urban centers of the nation, Negro citizens are consigned and confined—but not resigned," said Whitney M. Young Jr., executive director of the National Urban League. Young addressed approximately 700 people at the closing banquet of the 51st National Urban League's annual conference in 1961, his first as its new head.

"They are consigned to menial jobs, inadequate education, health and welfare facilities. They are confined to urban ghettos, where their housing is substandard and where they are exposed to vicious anti-social influences. But the Negro citizen is definitely not resigned to accepting these conditions."

"Much more is at stake (at the outset of the new League administration) than personal impressions of **Whitney Young**. At stake is the future and reputation of an agency whose past contributions are reflected not in monuments of stone, but in the lives of hundreds of thousands of Americans.

"At stake are people—their hopes and their aspirations for themselves and their loved ones as they witness all around them great social and technological changes which not only threaten their dreams of a better tomorrow, but make uncertain even that sordid existence which is theirs today.

**"It is important to emphasize that breakdowns in Negro family life are caused by the whole range of social influences. These impinge on the family and will, in the final instance, be best corrected by attacking the whole gamut of influences, which contribute to this breakdown. All too often, current society has battered and broken the Negro family and then placed the blame on that family for what happens to it."**

**WHITNEY M. YOUNG JR.**



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corrected by attacking the whole gamut of influences, which contribute to this breakdown. All too often, current society has battered and broken the Negro family and then placed the blame on that family for what happens to it.

American creed and democratic promises. Ours is an obligation most immediate to the Negro citizens or other minorities whom we serve, but in the final analysis it is a responsibility of all America as it faces its greatest hour of challenge.

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corrected by attacking the whole gamut of influences, which contribute to this breakdown. All too often, current society has battered and broken the Negro family and then placed the blame on that family for what happens to it.

"Regarding the question of future directions for the League, and my own personal convictions, I think that as a movement we will be at war—at war against prejudice and discrimination, against apathy and indifference, against rationalization, greed, selfishness and ignorance. We will not hesitate to identify our enemies in this war—whether they be Negro or white—confident that by rendering this service to our communities our support will be increased, not diminished.

"I contend, over many protests, that as the Negro for over 300 years has been given the special consideration of exclusion, he must now be given special treatment—through services and opportunities by society—that will insure his inclusion as a citizen able to compete equally with all others.

"One of our most plaguing problems of today, and increasingly so of tomorrow, is this:

"We are living in a national society that no longer feels that it discriminates, because it has removed some of the most visible signs which disturbed its conscience and were repugnant to its sense of decency and its knowledge of fair play. It is a society that in the process of so doing would simultaneously close its eyes to the subtle prejudices that remain. It is one inclined to conveniently claim amnesia concerning the generations of tragic deprivation and denial to which the Negro citizen has been subjected and from which many still bear the scars. It is a national society that would like to behave as if we are all started this race today on an equal basis."



**JOHN E. JACOB**

communities, and brokered fresh initiatives in such League programs as housing, health, education and minority business development.

Jordan also instituted a citizenship education program that helped increase the Black vote and brought new programs to such areas as energy, the environment and non-traditional jobs for women of color. He also developed The State of Black America report.

In 1982, **John E. Jacob**, a former chief executive officer of the Washington, D.C. and San Diego affiliates, who had served as executive vice president, took the reins of leadership, solidifying the League's internal structure and expanding its outreach even further.

Jacob established the Permanent Development Fund in order to increase the organiza-

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