

Former news exec, 35, is picked to lead NAACP

By Errin Haines and Ben Nuckols

BALTIMORE (AP) - The NAACP chose 35-year-old activist and former news executive Ben Jealous as its president May 17, making him the youngest leader in the 99-year history of the nation's largest civil rights organization.

The 64-member board of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People met for eight hours before selecting Jealous in the early morning. He was formally introduced May 17 and will take over as president in September.

"I'm excited," Jealous told The Associated Press. "I think that it's a real affirmation that this organization is willing to invest in the future, to invest in the ideas and the leadership of the generation that is currently raising black children in this country."

Though he is not a politician, minister or civil rights icon, Jealous provides the organization with a young but connected chief familiar with black leadership and social justice issues.

He takes the helm as the NAACP's 17th president just months before the organization's centennial anniversary and as the group looks to boost its coffers.

"There are a small number of groups to whom all black people in this country owe a debt of gratitude, and the NAACP is one of them," Jealous said. "There is work that is undone. ... The need continues and our children continue to be at great risk in this country."

Jealous succeeds Bruce Gordon, who resigned abruptly in March 2007. Gordon left after 19 months, citing clashes with board members over management style and the NAACP's mission as his reasons for leaving. Dennis Courtland Hayes had been serving as interim president and chief executive officer.

Jealous was born in Pacific Grove, Calif., and educated at Columbia University and Oxford University, where he was a Rhodes Scholar.

He began his professional life in 1991 with the NAACP, where he worked as a community organizer with the Legal Defense Fund, working on issues of health care access in Harlem. His family boasts five generations of NAACP membership.

During the mid 1990s, Jealous was managing editor of the Jackson Advocate, Mississippi's oldest black newspaper.

From 1999 to 2002, Jealous led the country's largest group of black community newspapers as executive director of the National Newspaper Publishers Association.

Jealous left the Publishers Association for Amnesty International to direct its U.S. Human Rights Program, for which he successfully lobbied for federal legislation against prison rape, public disapproval of racial profiling after Sept. 11, and exposure of widespread sentencing of children to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

Since 2005, Jealous has served as president of the Rosenberg Foundation, a private institution that supports civil and human rights advocacy. His experiences caught the attention of the NAACP's search committee, and Jealous said mentors encouraged him to take the job.

"Like all black people in this country, I am deeply grateful for what the NAACP has accomplished in the 20th century, and I want to make sure it's as strong and as powerful in the 21st century," he said. "If I thought that I could help rebuild, if I thought that I could help bring in more funds and give direction to the national staff and increase morale, I needed to take it very seriously, and that's what I've done."

The NAACP was founded in 1909 by an interracial coalition that battled segregation and lynching and helped win some of the nation's biggest civil rights victories. But in the wake of racial advances, the organization has struggled financially.

Despite his own successes, Jealous said that blacks in America still have a hard row to hoe, and that the gains of recent decades have created a false sense of progress.

"Those of us who are 45 and younger were told, 'The struggle has been won. Go out and flourish. Don't worry about the movement,'" he said.

Among his plans for the group are strengthening its online presence to connect with activists, mobilize public opinion and build a database for tracking racial discrimination and hate crimes; ensuring high voter turnout among blacks in the November election; pushing an aggressive civil rights agenda, regardless of the makeup of the Congress or White House; and re-tooling the national office to make it more effective at helping local branches affect change in their communities.

He said he does not see expect to have the challenges with NAACP leadership of which his predecessor complained.

"I was raised in the civil rights movement," Jealous said. "I don't see anything special here that would be a challenge that I haven't confronted and dealt effectively with before. These are my people."

What Jealous lacks in oratorical appeal, he makes up for as an administrator - skills he honed during his tenure with the Publishers Association, said the Rev. Joseph Lowery. And his foundation experience could help with fundraising - especially as the NAACP looks to raise \$100 million in conjunction with its 100th anniversary in February.

"Ben would be a good administrator and a thorough and detailed kind of executive," Lowery said. "He would meticulously follow through on details."

Lowery said Jealous' Publishers Association experience also gave him an edge with national black leadership and maturity - not that Lowery thinks his age is an issue.

"That's not young," Lowery said when told Jealous was 35, pointing out that the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was 26 when he led the Montgomery bus boycott. "I wouldn't say he's too young. He's an emotionally and intellectually mature fellow."

Jealous said having the energy of a 35-year-old will be an asset to the organization.

"It means having somebody who is impatient and outraged that race is still a factor in our society," he said.

He added that he can attract 25- to 50-year-olds - the missing demographic among most chapters - back to the organization. And he said he is eager to work with other groups to push his agenda.

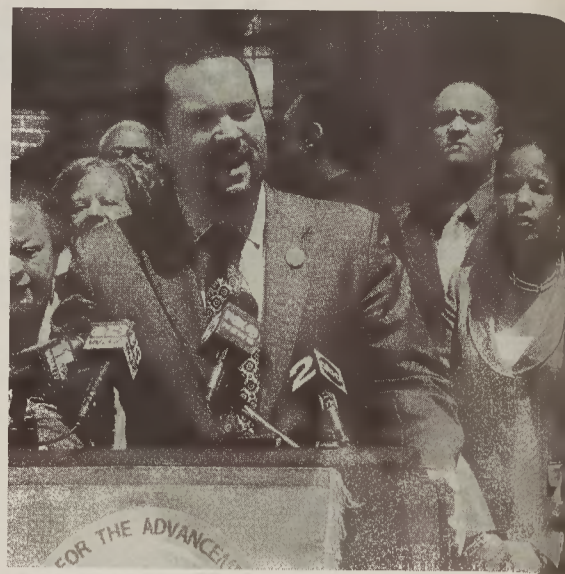
"This is the century when white people will become a minority in this country," he said. "What that means is right now, we need to have a clear picture of where we're headed and work together diligently with Latinos, Native Americans, Asians and progressive white groups as if our collective future depends on it. I'm committed to that."

It's a tall order that isn't likely to happen overnight, but Jealous - whose resume doesn't reflect a record of longevity - said he's ready to settle in for the long haul. He has spent much of his life in California but has roots in Baltimore, where the NAACP is based. His mother was born in Baltimore, and his parents met while teaching at a junior high school in the city.

"As a black child growing up in this country, there was no higher ambition possible than to lead the NAACP," he said. "No one should be concerned about me going anywhere too soon."

Errin Haines reported from Atlanta.

On the Net:
NAACP: <http://www.naacp.org>



BENJAMIN JEALOUS

Motown/Civil Rights (Continued From Page 1)

Over the ensuing decades, McNair found himself in one civil rights struggle after another, not always voluntarily. Many involved struggles for opportunity as a designer/graphic artist, and he lost a lot of jobs in the process. In fact, McNair joined Motown only after becoming frustrated with an employer who gave him a promotion but refused to give him a permanent spot to sit.

McNair is not bitter, however, and has no regrets.

"I feel like I'm blessed to live in America," he says, "but we waste much time on racism. I didn't let it define me. I accepted it as it was and challenged it by doing everything I could to prove myself."

In 1990, McNair left Detroit to visit Laurinburg, where his family owned about 100 acres for close to a century. He decided to stay.

Life became simpler, starting with a job as an elementary school art teacher in Rockingham.

In 2003, while visiting First Baptist Church in Wadesboro, he met his future wife, Donna Ingram. She, too, was at work on a second life, having retired as an assistant superintendent with the Durham County schools to become a Pentecostal minister.

The two wed in 2005 and now live on nine acres outside Wadesboro.

Since then, Curtis McNair has become something of a local celebrity, including being invited to display his oil paintings, commercial graphics and album covers in a show last month in Wadesboro.

He agreed to speak on opening night and was greeted by a capacity crowd that was a broad mix of old and young, black and white.

It surprised him, partly because he couldn't imagine that many people cared. But it also suggested that maybe, just maybe, his time at Motown was as meaningful as the marches and sit-ins.

Then again, maybe not.

After an hour of talking, McNair agreed to field questions.

"So," yelled someone from the crowd, "what about Diana Ross?"

McNair couldn't help but smile.

"What about her?"



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