

# An Interview with Dean Ishman

An Oral History Conducted by Claytee D. White

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The Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project

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# Preface

Dean Ishman shares a thumbnail sketch of his background in New York and a brief description of his decision to move to Las Vegas in 1995. He had not been involved with the NAACP in New York, but his work in the church led him to the Inner-Faith Council for Workers Justice. Because of his involvement with that organization, he was asked to serve as president of NAACP in Las Vegas.

Dean's immediate predecessors were Spencer Barrett and Gene Collins. He discusses the reorganization of the NAACP after Collins, listing those involved in training and re-chartering. He also recalls the fund raising event that was held after the reorganization (2002) and his ascension to the presidency (2003).

As president of the NAACP, Dean recalls instituting phone and mail logs to better track complaints and requests. He also shares memories of Freedom Fund Banquets and the speakers who were invited, the Suave Lopez shooting, and the NAACP branches established in Nevada prisons.

Dean discusses his presidency's focus on building dues-paying memberships, efforts at recruiting Hispanics, and his current involvement with the Hope Scholarship Golf Tournament. His closing comments include letting ancestors know that the struggle continues and reminding future generations to get involved.

**This is Claytee White. And I'm with Dean Ishman.**

**Am I pronouncing that correctly?**

Correct.

**It is July 2nd, 2009. And we're in his church here in Las Vegas.**

**So how are you doing today?**

Fantastic. I'm happy that someone is actually doing this sort of thing in light of the frustration I have in ascending to the presidency. So thank you.

**Tell me, where did you grow up?**

I grew up in Queens, New York. Born in the Bronx, raised in Queens and graduated from John Adams High School and attended New York City Technical College and didn't graduate. I married early and started a family and then went on the police department there, transit police.

**I just saw (Helen one, two, three).**

Ah, yeah. Yeah.

**Okay. So how did you get to Las Vegas?**

I came to Las Vegas by choice. I retired from the police department with a back injury. And I was thoroughly disgusted with the snow, with the ice even more so and just the really inclement weather. So I looked for someplace to go where it was warm and dry. And I looked at Las Vegas, as well as New Mexico and Arizona. But Las Vegas had the same flavor, if you will, as New York did; that being a 24-hour city. My family insisted upon that. And so here we came.

**Fantastic. So which year was that?**

That was in 1995.

**Had you been active in the NAACP in New York?**

I had not. No, I did not. And like I said at that time I was on the police department. And so there was some conflict there and I guess I was dismayed with some of the activities that were going on. I don't even want to elaborate on that right now.

**So how did you get involved once you came to Las Vegas?**

It's roundabout and I think it's best to say I was led by God to do that because my work started as it is here, in the church. And my work in the church led me to the Inner-Faith Council for Workers Justice, for which I was one of only two lay members with a bunch of clergy members -- rabbis,

pastors and imams. So I served with them and we went around town in support of workers' rights. Unfortunately, we live in a right-to-work state, which simply means that an employer has a right to fire. That's as we see it.

On many occasions we went to employers' businesses and lifted up the rights of workers, so that's pretty much where my work started. And we would interview them, being the employees, and try to determine exactly what the problem was. And usually it was just the attitude and the culture of Las Vegas that said, you know, I'm the employer; I can fire you anytime I want. So what? You know, you've got a problem, I don't care. So we spent a lot of time fighting against that and also the workers' right to organize for which even now that's a great struggle. They make it hard doing the card checks. So I started there.

I guess coming here I was a bit resistant to becoming the president. Someone had asked me. And this is after the branch had been shut down. There was none. And I knew --

**Who was the president prior to you?**

Prior to me was Spencer Barrett. And I actually brought this to Spencer Barrett because prior to him it was Gene Collins. And following Gene Collins is when they snatched the charter and shut the branch down. I said, as well as some other friends, you know, this is a real crime; there is a need for the NAACP here in Las Vegas. And so I immediately got involved with the reorganization committee.

**Who else was on that committee?**

The reorganization committee was -- wow -- a lot of folks -- Marion Bennett, Kevin Tate was the administrator. Joe Neal was a part of that. Yvonne Gates was a part of that. Debbie Conway. Claudette Whitson. What's his name was the attorney. I can't think of his name now, but he was an attorney and he was an attorney for Harrah's for a while. I just can't get his name out right now.

**But this is good.**

Harriett Trudeaux. Ida Gaines. Well, at that time even Lawrence Weekley and several others because I think everybody recognized that we really needed an NAACP. Everybody became a part of that reorganization, and I got immediately involved at that point. So we went through training.

**Who trained you?**

Frank Humphrey.

**Regional office or national office?**

He is from the national board office. He was appointed as the administrator. He brought in Kevin Tate to be the reorganization chairperson. So we went through a series of trainings I guess late 2001 I would say. That whole reorganization process took a year and a half or so. Well, it took a year I would say because we were actually re-chartered in April of 2003.

**So did you have to have an election in April?**

We did have an election, but that was prior to the actual re-chartering. We were still under the administratorship and in reorganization. We were called the Reorganization Committee then. So we functioned as a branch, but we were not nationally recognized until, in fact, we were re-chartered, which came later.

**So did you become president during that period of that reorganization?**

Well, yes and no. Just prior to the official reorganization, which was in April of 2003, I became the president by ascension. Spencer Barrett was the president. I was first vice president. I was appointed first vice president at that time. And then the bishop of the AME Church came in and moved him to Missouri. And so I ascended to the presidency. At the time I didn't want to be president. As I had tried to share a little bit earlier, or intended to, it was never my intention to be the president. I went and got Spencer Barrett, who was my pastor. And I said you need to do this. My promise to him was that -- he said if I'm going to be the president, you're going to be right here with me.

**I see. So now, is this an AME church that we're sitting in now?**

This is a sister church to First AME, which is where my activism started in Las Vegas.

**Okay, good. So as that first vice president and becoming president, who else served with you? Do you remember your treasurer, your secretary, anyone else?**

Yes. At that time -- exactly -- Debbie Conway was the treasurer. Claudette Whitson was the secretary.

**And were some of those other people that you named earlier on the executive committee?**

**You named some other people earlier -- Ida Gaines and other names.**

Yes. They were all a part of that original executive committee, if you will. Yeah, they were all a

part of that reorganization. And so I'm trying to think of -- well, Reverend Hodges was the second vice president at that time, Anthony Hodges. He was the second vice president. And Tyron Thompson was the assistant secretary at that time.

**Wonderful. Once the reorganization was over and you became a chartered branch again, did the branch number change or was it still the same?**

The number? No. It was the same.

**Still the same.**

Yeah.

**What were some of the events that you put on immediately?**

Well, one of the first things that we did was to have a Freedom Fund. That was the very first event that we had in 2002. But at that time Spencer Barrett was -- and that was in August I believe or September of 2002. That was the very first Freedom Fund event that we had. And from August to December he served as president. Yeah. Yeah, from August to December when he was moved to Missouri.

**So then at the beginning of 2003 you became president.**

Yes.

**Do you remember that speaker at that Freedom Fund Banquet or anything about it?**

I want to say it was Congressman Ford. I believe it was Ford. I can't think of his first name right now.

**Yes. I can find that.**

**Was that a very successful event? Were people happy to have the branch back?**

Well, definitely. Definitely. And Ford came. Yeah, I think he excited the folks that attended. And so it was very good.

**Wonderful. What were some of the issues -- first, how long were you president? Starting with 2003, how long did you stay in?**

Until December '07.

**Wow. That was a long presidency.**

Yeah. For one that wasn't to be, yeah.

**So you really served two two-year terms.**

Yes.

**What were some of the issues in those two years that you faced or that the branch faced?**

Issues, there were many. One of the first challenges that we had was the fact that we didn't have an office. And it wasn't until technically that I had ascended that we moved into the office that exists now, 3340 South Topaz. And at that time when we first moved in -- and I remember quite well -- that one of the frustrations was I was the office. And so anytime you called I answered the phone, which was good and bad.

**Because you were retired.**

Yeah. Well, and I had -- believe it or not I had a number of nonpaying jobs. To this day I'm still the vice president of my homeowners association, 1219 homes, another somewhat thankless job. But, yeah, I had a few. It was a challenge jockeying stuff. But I wanted to do the work. I didn't want to do all the work. But, yeah, I was definitely -- and it started as I said through workers' rights. I was very interested in that part of it. And I served prior to the ascension on the legal redress. So I did hear the complaints and was very familiar with what was going on because of the calls.

I used to joke often with Kevin Tate, who was the reorganization chair. A lot of the calls for legal redress went to my cell phone because we did not have an office and no phone. So my cell phone was technically the office at that time. So I heard it all. And, you know, it was funny. Once we got the office up, a lot of times people would say, well, yeah, we tried to get you and we just couldn't get through, I had to tell them no, you didn't, because I knew where the calls were going. I was like no, it was not happening that way. So it was funny. And I got challenged a couple of times that way even on air, on the radio. Yeah, we tried to -- well, no.

And for that express reason we started a log, which I believe is still going on right now. But we kept a call log and a mail log. I learned later to create one of those so that each call that came in we could refer to. If you made a call and/or you sent in a complaint, we had a log that covered it.

**Oh, that's fantastic.**

We weren't all that computer savvy at that time, but we had those written documents.

**It's great to have those.**



So it was good.

**Were there any other Freedom Fund Banquets between 2003 and 2007 that you remember?**

Well, I mean I remember them all.

**Any one that stands out that was special for you?**

Well, I would say Julian Bond coming was a special one for me. I thoroughly enjoyed him coming and sharing with us. And there might have been one other. And I'm trying to think of the folks that we had there running it. We had Congresswoman Sheila Leslie I believe. And it's funny I can't put all these people together.

**You think we'll be able to get Barack this time? I'm just kidding.**

I surrendered that. And I was actually not happy with him. We made two attempts to have him speak. And the issue that I had was simply the fact that they never got back to me with a yes or a no. And that was disturbing to me. Hillary we reached out to, although she would not do it.

**Wow. I think that's probably unusual because he was there for the -- what was that? -- the King dinner or the Urban League or something.**

Yeah, I think. I'm not even certain myself. But I heard. I have kind of tuned it out at that point.

**I understand. Any other memories of that four-year period that stand out in any way?**

Well, we took a stance and it was something that was near and dear to me. That was with relation to the Suave Lopez shooting. And that was the young man who was handcuffed and later shot to death. Being a former police officer I knew very well what was reasonable and what was not reasonable to do. And in my opinion, you know, that was a bad shooting. I had those conversations with the sheriff extensively. I believe in my heart of hearts he knew it was bad. The law allowed it to happen. What's legally right unfortunately is not always morally right. But there was a precedent, which I tried to address. And that is there was a Supreme Court ruling, which we honored in New York, which said you do not shoot a fleeing felon especially one -- and that's Tennessee versus Garner if I make no mistake -- especially if he's handcuffed. Now, my argument -- and the sheriff said, look, you know, I could tell you I wouldn't have done it. And I'm pretty sure he would not have. But I think these guys were embarrassed that he escaped.

**Do police officers not learn to shoot well enough to shoot somebody in the leg?**

Well, I have to tell you there is no such thing. And in a press conference I shared that and I shared

that with the public and asked them to have restraint because there's no such thing. As a part of justification, you do not shoot to wound. There is no such thing on any police department. You do not shoot to wound. And if you as a cop are trying to do that, you better not tell it because you will get -- shooting to wound means you've got to shoot my little arm or my little leg. Now, if you're standing behind me, the chances of me hitting your arm are slim to none.

**So this part of my body is much larger.**

Exactly.

**I'm a better target.**

You shoot for center mass. And technically when you draw your weapon, it is to protect your life or the life of someone else. It's just that simple.

**So in this case you really didn't have to protect your life or anyone else's with a man fleeing who's handcuffed.**

Exactly, in my opinion. They argued, well, he's fleeing; we knew he had a weapon. I'm like, well, you disarmed him. But he could get another one and he made a threat that he was going to kill so-and-so if he got out. I'm like but that's not immediate. His getting away is not immediate. The first thing he's got to do is get out of the handcuffs. You know, so I had a very hard time with that. We made a lot of noise about that. I actually got involved with the ACLU and Professor Rob Correales from UNLV. We tried to draft some legislation. And we went to Assemblyman Harvey Munford to help us with that. It failed.

**So tell me more about this professor. What happened?**

Professor Correales? Well, I know he's still there. He's tenured. But I mean we put this paper together, if you will. And really we turned it over to Assemblyman Munford to try to get it passed. Somehow legislators had watered it down and turned it into something that we didn't even present. The meat of what we were trying to get passed in my opinion was that there must be an eminent threat of danger for someone to be shot who is escaping. And in our state laws that little piece was left out. That's the piece that in my opinion allowed them to get away with shooting him in the back.

**I see. Wow.**

**What kind of relationship did you have with the regional office and with the national**

**office once the branch was reorganized?**

With the regional office, with the regional officer who wasn't there very long before he left -- there was a vacancy -- but we had a good relationship. That was with Frank Berry. But he started getting ill and then later vacated his position. And so there really wasn't anyone as a regional director. That was Frank Berry at the time. With the regional office I think we had problems with communication, not just communication, and getting responses.

**They probably didn't have a cell phone.**

Yeah. Certainly didn't want to give one, you know. But, yeah. And I think even right now they have a problem with getting definitive decisions. And I know those things can't be done immediately, but the response can. I have your complaint. We're reviewing it and we will get back to you and give me some -- you know.

We've had one pressing problem and that was with the prison branch. At one time the national office was supporting it. Then one time they weren't. And they were saying, well, leave the prison thing alone; don't bother. Then I guess there was enough noise made that they said, okay, we're going to have to address this. Then they came back and said, well, yeah, you will support the prison branches. And so we had to go through that series of changes as well.

**So do we have prison branches here in Nevada?**

Yes.

**Oh, we do?**

Yes. Well, that's disputed too. We certainly have one. There was an attempt -- and that's what I told myself and kind of took pride in -- initiating the second one, which was at the Southern Desert Correctional Facility. The one that was already established was at High Desert State Prison. But we did go in and organize the Southern Desert Correctional Center. We thought they were up and running as a branch. And initially they were. What happened was their membership fell off due to prison restrictions. And our national office had been on a mission to stop having branches that are under 50 members. So when that happens especially in the prison setting, they said, well, no, we're going to make it one. And we had problems with that because then mail was going to the wrong prison. It was a nightmare.

But technically there is one branch now. And they're trying to make both of them 1114,

which is the branch number that they've given to it. Prior to my leaving I had even asked and sent some correspondence trying to get at least an A and B designation so that it would be understood where the mail should go and to whom. But the director was operating. Then she wasn't operating. Then she was operating. It was confusing.

**And I can see in a setting like that where that could be very confusing, very difficult.**

**What do you think about the financial split especially a branch trying to get organized and you're sending -- is it 60 percent still?**

Yes.

**And at that point when you're trying to get a branch going and you're trying to build memberships, what was that like for you?**

It was not fun. One thing that I had to learn was that the Freedom Fund, which was the only event that we were having -- and this is coming out of reorganization. So, again, there was no confidence in the NAACP. And folks, if they didn't know, they just didn't know. Oh, they're not doing anything. Well, you're not in here on the phones trying to mediate in situations and don't know. But that was part of my frustration, if you will, with the whole process. But I learned quickly that we had to have more than one major event in order to get the branch to survive because regardless -- and along with the membership 60-40 here's your Freedom Fund event. And they just started this lately. But you used to have to give 25 percent of whatever you raised there.

**Used to. Did it change?**

Well, here's the thing. They started something -- if you were increasing your membership and in a year's time you increased your membership by 35 percent, then they would reduce the portion that you had to send to national.

**From the Freedom Fund?**

From the Freedom Fund or from any fundraising event. And we got there. We finally got there. And I think that was in '06 to '07 that we got there. So instead of the 25 we were giving them 15 percent there. We had that reduction with the membership as well, and that was a good thing for us.

Unfortunately of course, the more successes you have, then the more demand that you have. And now here it was we were being recognized. And I won't say that there were any major

accomplishments in the area of civil rights. They're hard to come by. But here it was in my opinion we were trying to get a branch functioning. And one of the things that I had said in a brochure that we had put out was simply that I want to focus on building something that's sustainable, which was getting people to move from regular memberships to subscribing to life memberships to keep them on the books and to sustain the branch because one fundraiser we knew would not do it and could not. So getting that together and then getting a well -- let's say a better oiled legal redress in terms of addressing the concerns, for which unfortunately we became more of a gripe mechanism. And everyone had a complaint.

**But they weren't members.**

Yes. Yes. And the unfortunate truth is that 99.5 percent, if not more, of the complaints came from nonmembers. They were using the resources. We're generating paper and certainly our costs went up in-house because we had to generate complaint forms. Now we're sending papers back and forth and letters. It was not a pretty thing. Like I said I had not been in that position. I only understood after going through it, which is good. You know, you take those knocks; you understood well what's going on.

**Right. Did you have any active non-blacks in your branch?**

Yes, we did.

**Any Mexican, Hispanics, whites?**

Harriett Trudeau initially was one. And I think Harriett was on the political action committee at that time. And we had someone whom I adored -- Bob Ensworth, who was a white gentleman. I forget whether it was economic development Bob was on or -- he might have been involved with a couple. But he was near and dear. And if you asked him to do something, he was going to do it. And I certainly appreciated that in him. I'm trying to think who else.

One thing I couldn't fully understand that was sorely missed was Hispanics in the NAACP. And I made an effort to do some recruiting in that area. We might have got a few Hispanic members but not really participating members, just membership if you will.

**This city could use that.**

**So the president after you was Brewer.**

Yes. Andy succeeded me.

**And then Frank Hawkins.**

Yes.

**During your time there did you find any records giving us any kind of chronology of presidents prior? Did you find anything?**

You know what? I have asked and received something, but it wasn't necessarily in a chronological order. And I do have that. And I don't know why I did not bring that with me. It talked about McCants, who was the first. And it talked about Reverend Donald Clark and some of the others. It also listed Eleanor Walker and some of the others.

**Well, if you run across that no matter when, I would love to have a copy of it. You have my card.**

Oh, I can get that to you. I have my own. And that's one thing I had to do because, again, the office for a long time was on my cell phone. So I had to have records at the office, as well as home because a lot of things I needed to refer to. So I had my own set and then I had a set that I always kept in the office.

**Good. I would appreciate it. And if you have records that you would love -- now, I know that you can't do this without permission. But I work in Special Collections in UNLV's library, which means that people give us collections so that people can come to the library and do research. So I'm in a special area where things are not checked out. You come in there and you do research. If the NAACP ever gets to the place where they'd like to donate those local records, we'd love to have them.**

Well, minutes certainly are something. That's not for the public, technically. It is, but it was always for our membership. But I don't see why there should be an issue there. But certainly I would talk to Frank.

**I will talk to Frank. And you know now that we're interested as well.**

Yeah. But that's what I'm saying. A lot of that he should have there in the office like I said because I had sets.

**I will talk to Frank.**

**So are you still active in any way today?**

Yes and no. Technically I am still on the golf committee – Andy, like I said, was a near and dear

friend, has been for many years. And he said, man, I want to help you. And I'm like, well, I want to start this Hope Scholarship Golf Tournament. I see this as a way of bringing in some major funds into the branch. And he said, man, I want to do that for you. And so that's something I'd like to take credit for starting, knowing that he could bring that across. Right now it will be the third annual scholarship committee. And Andy is passionate about it.

**Yes. He talked about it yesterday. So I'm looking forward to attending the dinner and the fashion show, not the golf.**

Okay. Okay. Yeah. I was on that. And technically I had said to Frank that I would stay on the prison project, simply because I did have clearance to go up there. But since then the chairperson during my tenure, who was Cassandra Watkins, has come back. Then I said to myself, well, maybe this is the opportunity for me to back up and do some other things for which I'm trying to do. We're trying to grow this church. I'm excited about the opportunity to do that.

**That's great. Like I told you earlier, there are three questions that Frank wants me to ask everyone. What are you most proud of in your term as NAACP president?**

Well, I guess I would say the golf tournament definitely would be one thing that stands out and something that I think will last. Starting and initiating the Hope Scholarship Golf Classic is something I am most proud of.

**To whom do those scholarships go -- high school students?**

Yes. They would go to high school students. It may have changed since I left because they were trying to tweak some things. But that is where those funds are supposed to go.

**Now, do you have to share those proceeds with the national office?**

We have to report it, but to my understanding, no. The scholarship portion is just that. However, what we had done -- and, again, this was on my way out -- we had toyed with it. I think under Andy's tenure we had gone ahead and tweaked the scholarship in that we said that -- and I think it's a 50-50 now, where 50 percent of the funds raised would be to scholarship. But they were talking about changing that number to maybe 25 percent going right into the scholarships and using the rest for operational costs. I don't know exactly where that went. I didn't have much to do with that.

**What would you say to our ancestors if you could? It doesn't have to be about NAACP, but**

**anything.**

Well, I would simply say that we're not quite there yet. The struggle continues. We've made some progress, but we're still not there yet. We have not arrived. I don't think we'll ever actually arrive. I'd like to see us make some greater strides. I'd like to see us get to a place where we can accept each other, and that's racially, and not just tolerate each other.

**Right. I don't like that word either.**

It frustrates me to death to hear that. It really does. That's like then maybe having some oral surgery and no anesthesia or something. Yeah, you have to tolerate me. I'm here. I was born here. You were born.

**Same God.**

Yes. Yes. We all believe red.

**So what message would you send to future generations?**

Get involved, just simply to get involved. Be a part of the process and help make that process better than what it is. I am still frustrated with our political system and how it works. I just have a personal problem with parties. I think we should be driven by issues, concerns. If there's a problem, let's address it. Let's not, as I see it, divide ourselves by party and leave a problem out there simply because. I have witnessed and have heard that some bills that could benefit hundreds, maybe thousands of people go un-addressed because a particular party chair says, well, I'm not going to put this out and they put it in a drawer and kill the bill for a legislative session because the guy on the other side didn't support their measures. And I think that's a crime in itself. So I would just say get involved.

**Wonderful. I really appreciate this.**

**The last thing: Do you think two years is long enough for a president to do what they need to do for a branch like ours?**

For a branch like ours especially not. No, I don't. Unfortunately, you know, two years is only enough time to probably know your people and know who you can turn to to get something done. So I think it's really tough. By the time you get some synergy going, there's a chance that you'll be out and you're starting over again. There's a new president and you're starting over. So it's tough. And in this town, as transient as it is, folks come and go in the NAACP and in this town so fast,



the folks that I got involved with in the NAACP are all gone. When I looked up everybody was gone.

**Is it that they're just not active or have they moved away?**

Some. And I know quite a few. The majority of them went for jobs, which pulled them away. A couple of them -- well, a few relocated and went other places. So, again, there's that being a transient town.

**Well, I really appreciate this. And I'm so glad we finally got together.**

Yeah. Me too. Me too. Like I said I was -- and I'm still coming back. And that's why my phone is blowing up right now. One of my members. And they're probably calling to tell me -- they called and told me she died. Technically she did, but then they called me back and said she's on life support. I'm like, well, look, I started calling people already and telling them she's gone. So I held off on that and I'm suspecting that the family got there.

**Great. I will let you start dealing with that again. Thank you so much.**