

# Young activists struggle with 'passing of the torch'

By Artelia C. Covington

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 some-



**Rather than praise, young activist Markel Hutchins says he's received scorn from civil rights leaders for his advocacy.**

one 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 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 (See Activists, Page 6)



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