

Next NAACP president must have unique qualities

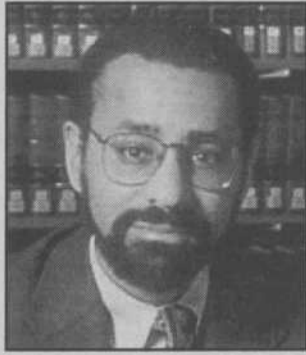
By Hazel Trice Edney
Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON (NNPA) — The person who succeeds Kweisi Mfume as president of the NAACP must be versatile, equally comfortable protesting in the streets as wielding power and influence in the corporate suites, Civil Rights Movement experts say.

“We need a person who is equally comfortable in a pulpit, a corporate boardroom and meeting the press, who can talk with ex-offenders and Nobel laureates and who appreciates the importance of doing both,” says Christopher Edley Jr., dean of the law school at the University of California-Berkeley.

Mfume resigned last week after frequent feuds with Board Chairman Julian Bond. When he first took office nearly nine years ago, the former five-term Congressman from Baltimore was replacing Benjamin Chavis, who had mired the organization in a sexual harassment suit that was settled out of court and had, with Board Chairman William Gibson, plunged the organization more than \$3 million in debt.

“When I arrived, the NAACP was mired in debt



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and steeped in doubt,” Mfume said at a news conference. “There is [now] \$15 million in cash reserves and a flourishing endowment of several million more. I’ve had the honor and the privilege to help revive and restore this great organization, which has become an American institution.”

The improved finances should help Mfume’s successor.

“With a much stronger financial footing, the association is poised to create a much bolder advocacy-oriented movement that shakes up things from the school board to the Congress and everything in between,” says Edley. “[Former Democratic presidential candidate] Howard Dean showed that you can raise money in small amounts to build a large movement.

And with resources like that, the NAACP could create a cadre of community-based leadership that would generate a civil rights Renaissance.”

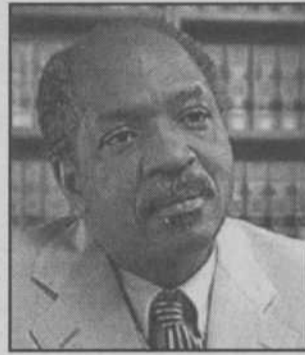
However, lack of funds was only one of Mfume’s problems.

“Mfume did a great job of raising money and he’s got the right values and everything else, but I think he was not effective as a leader of the NAACP and as a policy player in national policy because he was so inaccessible,” says Mary Frances Berry, chairwoman of the U. S. Commission on Civil Rights. “Anyone who is in policy-making or civil rights or government said the whole time he was there, they had trouble getting in touch with him.”

Berry says the next NAACP president should

focus on issues such as the continued assault on affirmative action, federal judicial appointments, the AIDS crisis, the decline of Black students in professional schools, and the high Black unemployment rate.

Charles Ogletree, the noted professor at the Harvard Law School, observes that a major reason activists were successful in the 1950s and 1960s was because of their close ties to Black churches and involving ministers, such



ters,” Ogletree suggests. “I think there was the sense that the mission of the 20th century of legal and racial segregation was accomplished and we didn’t realize there was really a lot of additional work to be done.

Now it’s time to go back to revisit those principals of a social and economic agenda.”

Rev. Jamal Bryant, pastor of Empowerment Temple in Baltimore, agrees.

“Post the King era, we’ve moved from a religious-based

“It [NAACP] needs to go back to its historic base and try to re-energize its relationship with the Black church as one of our historic organizing centers.”

— Charles Ogletree, professor at the Harvard Law School

as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Rev. Andrew Young, Rev. Joseph Lowery, Rev. Ralph Abernathy, Rev. Hosea Williams, Rev. James Bevel and Rev. John Lewis.

“It needs to go back to its historic base and try to re-energize its relationship with the Black church as one of our historic organizing cen-

to an economics-based [movement] and so we have more millionaires, but we have less morals. But I think there needs to be a reconnect of the synergy with the religious community, because quite frankly, that’s how the Republicans won — on morals,” says Bryant, 33, who served as director of the

NAACP Youth and College Division early in Mfume’s tenure. “The NAACP is going to have to juxtapose those realities. We are the moral conscience; not just by our words, but by our actions.”

According to an Edison Mitofsky election exit poll, when asked why they reported for a particular president in November, 22 percent of voters cited moral values as their top choice, followed by the economy/jobs (20 percent) and terrorism (19 percent).

Like the general population, many Blacks are conservative on social issues. A Zogby International poll showed that 63 percent of African-Americans polled are pro-life.

A New York Times poll a year ago showed that 75 percent of Blacks oppose same-sex marriages.

Though African-Americans are conservative on moral issues, they are liberal on civil rights issues and overwhelmingly support traditional civil rights organizations, such as the NAACP and the National Urban League. The NAACP claims a membership of 500,000, which would make it the largest. (See NAACP, Page 12)

Bugchasers

(Continued from Page 1)

a part of something. It’s a distorted way of exploring how you can become intimate with someone else.”

Douaihy, also a consulting psychiatrist at Pittsburgh AIDS Center for Treatment, says along with confusion, depression and mental illness contribute to what he considers self-destructive behavior.

“When you look at the older generation of gay men who have lost most of their friends and loved ones to HIV, they struggle a lot with depression, feeling of helplessness, and survival guilt,” explains Douaihy. “They don’t feel like they should live. They become clinically depressed, hopeless, uncertain about their future and emotionally numb. They end up self-medicating with alcohol, drugs, tranquilizers, sleeping pills, etc. and it becomes a vicious cycle.”

According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), “People with alcohol use disorders are more likely than the general population to contract HIV. Similarly, people with HIV are more likely to abuse alcohol at some time during their lives. Alcohol use is associated with high-

risk sexual behaviors and injection drug use, two major modes of HIV transmission.”

At a time when society promotes using condoms to prevent becoming infected with HIV or other sexually-transmitted diseases (STDs), “bug chasers” are participating in unprotected sex in an attempt to contract the deadly disease.

Other reasons cited for having unprotected sex with someone who is HIV-positive include “living life on the edge,” “showing your love for your positive partner,” “acceptance into social circles,” and “thoughts that getting HIV is inevitable, so why avoid it?”

Armstrong, the magazine editor, is a gay man and is HIV-negative. “Being HIV-positive got turned into meaning you are truly gay and that is a really dangerous thing. That confusion is really what underlies this phenomenon.”

Douaihy says there have not been any research studies or scientific data looking at the trend of people who intentionally seek to become infected with the virus.

“This whole concept of gift giving and the meaning of HIV is being manipulated

to meet specific goals and they [bug chasers and gift givers] are distorting the meaning of HIV to fulfill what they want it to mean,” he says. “The whole intimacy issue is a big one. Some people feel they can’t be intimate unless they let that person infect them. They don’t consider it an infection — it’s perceived as giving a gift.”

It is believed that most “bug chasers” find their “gift giver” on the Internet, using sites that actively promote having unprotected sex. Also, according to Cornelius Baker, executive director of the Witman-Walker clinic, a community-based health organization in Washington, D.C., conversion parties take place in most major cities.

“Some parties occur in hotels and we look for events that go on in Washington and try to intervene when we know they are going to occur,” explains Baker. “We have to acknowledge that some people do look at it as an ultimate sacrifice. They give themselves fully to someone ultimately risking their lives.”

Brett Parson, head of the Gay and Lesbian Liaison unit of the Washington Metropoli-

tan Police Department, says these parties are dangerous, but not illegal.

“As a police officer, we see victimization going on to the extent that people are engaging in high-risk activities that result in life-changing illness that can’t be reversed. What we try and do is educate people in making sound judgments and decisions,” he explains.

There are laws that prohibit the deliberate spreading of AIDS in more than 24 states, including California, Idaho, Ohio, Missouri,

Michigan and South Carolina. Under Bill SB 705 in California, “any person afflicted with any contagious, infectious, or communicable disease who willfully exposes himself or herself to another, and any person who willfully exposes another person afflicted with a disease of that nature, is guilty of a misdemeanor.” In New York, it is a felony to knowingly transmit a venereal disease.

Armstrong, who has lost many friends and loved ones to HIV, says, “If you’re sick enough in the head to give

someone HIV on purpose you should be put away. You’re robbing someone of their health and that’s not right.”

Baker says bug chasing happens in a small number, but should be taken seriously.

“This does occur periodically and we find it unfortunate, but this is a very small number of cases. The reality is that most people that become infected never knew they were at risk,” he says. “HIV is not a fantasy. It is real. It is serious. One moment is not worth the rest of your life.”

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