

Written by Joyce Jones | BET  
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Not many young African-American men can lay claim to having a bond with one — never mind two — U.S. presidents. But Gregory Lorjuste, deputy director of scheduling for President Obama, is one of the fortunate few. Before working on Obama's first White House bid, which ultimately led to his current gig, Lorjuste worked for former President Bill Clinton's Harlem-based foundation.

The White House is a long way from the crime-riddled Flatbush neighborhood where Lorjuste was raised by two hardworking parents who'd emigrated to the U.S. from Haiti so their brood of nine children could achieve American dreams. Growing up, he said in an interview with BET.com, he and his siblings "experienced lots of things that no kids should experience," including the loss by gunfire of a cousin and other people they cared for or looked up to.

Devoted teachers, who made learning fun; after-school programs; and weekend mentors who took the children ice skating, fishing and on other adventures kept them out of trouble and focused on their schoolwork so they wouldn't become unfortunate "products of their environment." Their dedication also inspired him to major in education at Rider University, a small liberal arts college in Lawrenceville, New Jersey.

Unfortunately, by the time Lorjuste was graduating from college in 2004, classroom instruction was more focused on preparing students to pass standardized tests. He decided to change direction and became an AmeriCorps Promise Fellow, which enabled him to work on a variety of projects, from disaster preparedness to technical assistance for nonprofits serving the underserved.

"Even if I wasn't in the classroom, I still wanted to be involved in working with kids in an urban community," he said, adding that AmeriCorps gave him an opportunity to "dabble in so many key issues that affect our society."

Lorjuste began dabbling in politics while campaigning for New Jersey Sen. Jon Corzine's first gubernatorial campaign in 2005. During that period, his boss also encouraged him to apply for then-Sen. Obama's "Yes We Can Hope Fund" campaign training program.

"I was skeptical and thought I'm never going to get picked and I'm more of a nonprofit guy," Lorjuste recalled.

But he was wrong and was one of 10 candidates selected from around the nation to receive

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training from some of the nation's top political operatives. During the weeklong program, the trainees also had dinner with Obama, who spent more time asking questions and learning more about them and their passions than he did talking about himself.

The program's mentors also continued to work with the trainees, checking in with them during a weekly conference call to offer job-seeking and other advice.

"It was through the Hope Fund training that I was able to land a job working for President Clinton's foundation," Lorjuste explained. "It opened so many doors and opportunities for us and everyone wanted to get a piece of the 'Obama Kids,' as they called us at the time."

Soon Lorjuste found himself in an enviable pickle. He had just received a promotion in the Clinton Foundation's scheduling department when New York Sen. Hillary Clinton announced her 2008 presidential bid. He also was asked to commit to the job for a year, because a lot of people were leaving to join Clinton's campaign.

Obama hadn't yet made his announcement, so Lorjuste accepted the promotion. And though his heart was on the Obama campaign trail, he sat out the primary season, but joined his operation during the general election as scheduling director for Virginia, helping a Democratic presidential candidate win the state for the first time since 1964.

And when he later encountered Clinton at a campaign stop, the former president embraced Lorjuste and said he was missed.

As state scheduler, Lorjuste coordinated timetables, logistics and locations. He also helped with crowd building, setting up event formats, working with different elected officials speaking at events and assisting with overall planning for Obama, Michelle Obama and Joe Biden.

After Obama won the election, Lorjuste was hired to work as a scheduler for the inauguration committee and on the eve of the historic day was offered a similar position at the White House. Today, he is one of three people who work on the day-to-day, minute-by-minute logistics for the president.

"It's special because our department's main priority is to organize events that allow the president to stay in touch with the American people and for them to hear directly from their commander-in-chief and his vision for moving the country forward," Lorjuste said. "It's gratifying to be able to play a small part in shaping how people hear and interact with the president, the smile on their faces when he's on the rope line or they're invited to participate in a roundtable discussion."

The most poignant moment for him, however, is an incident much closer to home. His mother, who had finally become a U.S. citizen, cast her very first ballot for Obama.

"She called me while waiting in line in the rain in Pennsylvania, but was so excited to vote for him. I was in Virginia working to get people to vote but to see how it impacts your family is so special," Lorjuste said.

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