

New NAACP president says protest in his DNA

Written by George E. Curry, NNPA Editor-in-Chief
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(SECOND OF TWO ARTICLES)

WASHINGTON (NNPA) – When Rev. Frederick D. Haynes III of Dallas, Texas learned that the NAACP Board of Directors had chosen Cornell William Brooks over him, Attorney Barbara R. Arnwine and several other better known candidates to succeed outgoing president Benjamin Todd Jealous, his response was "Who?"

And he wasn't the only one responding that way.

In an interview from Florida, where trustees had just made their selection, a board member who asked not to be identified by name said, "We turned the whole nation into a collection of owls," he said. "When they learned of our decision, everyone in the country was saying, "Who? Who? Who?"

Though he is not among the *Who's Who* of national civil rights advocates, Brooks feels his entire life has prepared him to become president and CEO of the NAACP. He graduated from Jackson State University in Mississippi with honors, earned a Master of Divinity degree with a concentration in systematic theology from Boston University School of Theology— where Dr. Martin Luther King earned his Ph.D. in the same area of study – and graduated from Yale Law School, serving as a senior editor of the *Yale Law Journal* and a member of the *Yale Law and Policy Review*.

After serving as a law clerk for Judge Sam J. Irvin III on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit, Brooks' first job was as an attorney at the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law headed by Barbara Arnwine. He later worked as an attorney for the Justice Department, a senior attorney for the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and was executive director of the Fair Housing Council of Greater Washington, D.C.

His most recent job was as president of the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice, a Newark-based organization founded in 1999 by the Alan V. and Amy Lowenstein Foundation. According to its website, the institute seeks to expand economic opportunity for people of color and low-income residents; promotes holding local, state and regional government accountable for fulfilling the needs of urban residents and protects the civil rights of the disadvantaged.

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"When you look at the arc of my career, it has not been singular or linear in focus, but really touched on many of the challenges facing the country – whether it be in business, the criminal justice system, the juvenile justice system, the housing market – so I think I bring a multi-dimensional, multi-disciplined, multi-faceted focus on work," Brooks said. "That does not make me unique, but perhaps distinctive."

Brooks will need that and more to be successful as the 18th president of the NAACP.

The 5-page job description developed by The Hollins Group, the NAACP-contracted search firm based in Chicago, noted among the specific job responsibilities: "Work closely with the Chairman and the Board and be responsible for developing the organization's U.S. private sector fundraising plan and growing its annual income and membership by 20%. This also will include expanding both staff and operations with an emphasis on building a larger base of private sector support and establishing an endowment."

According to the job description marked "confidential," the Baltimore-based NAACP has a staff of 100 and an annual budget of \$42 million. However, the organization is deeply in debt and recently cut its staff by 7 percent.

Brooks has never managed a staff that large. The New Jersey Institute for Social Justice had a total of 19 staff members and a budget of \$2.08 million. Its primary income was equally divided between government grants and investments, each bringing in approximately \$350,000 annually.

According to its IRS Form 990, it had a loss of \$421,939 in the fiscal year that ended Sept. 30, 2012. Even though it was losing money, Brooks collected base compensation of \$227,526, plus \$10,437 in retirement and deferred compensation and \$3,137 in nontaxable benefits for a total of \$241,100, according to the IRS filing.

Beyond the fiscal challenge, the expectation that Brooks can grow membership by 20 percent a year is considered a lofty goal for an organization that has long fudged its membership numbers. Former NAACP executive directors Roy Wilkins and Benjamin L. Hooks routinely claimed a membership of 500,000.

However, the *Baltimore Sun* did research and found that the NAACP had been claiming a membership of 500,000 since 1946. In 2006, then-president Bruce Gordon finally admitted that the figure was less than 300,000, where it still remains today.

Brooks seemed confident that he can attract young people to the nation's oldest – in longevity and by average age of members – civil rights organization.

"It's been my model, if you will, to engage young people, not by deputizing and delegating to them, but charging them with being co-creators of public policy," he said. "In work I've done thus far, we were not engaged in bringing young people to the kiddie table. We bring them to the conference table as co-creators of reform and it works. It's easy to get people excited about the work when they're doing the work. They are not, in effect, junior anything in the movement."

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"My grandfather, Rev. James Prioleau, in the 40s ran for Congress in the 6th Congressional District of South Carolina," said Brooks, a fourth-generation ordained minister and an associate pastor at Turner Memorial AME Church in Hyattsville, Md. "He ran for Congress not because he thought he could win, but rather because he wanted to register African Americans to vote and enlist in and engage in the membership of the NAACP. That legacy is part of my moral DNA."

With the upcoming mid-term elections and the passing of voting laws that adversely impact Blacks, some critics worry that Brooks will not be able to hit the ground running when he assumes office in July. However, he strongly disagrees.

"I think I am well prepared to do the work," he said confidently. "I am as confident in my colleagues as I am my own abilities. I don't think I'll have any problem hitting the ground running simply because there are a lot of folks running with me."