



A Century of Service: A History of the National Urban League

In 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court declared its support of Louisiana's 'separate but equal' segregation law in the *Plessey v. Ferguson* case. This decision to uphold the brutal economic, social and political system of oppression in the South led to a flood of African Americans to move northward, known as The Great Migration.

Those newcomers to the North soon discovered they had not escaped racial discrimination. Excluded from all but menial jobs, these black migrants were victimized by poor housing and education, and inexperienced in the ways of urban living; many endured terrible social and economic conditions. Yet, in the degree of difference between South and North, African Americans clearly understood there lay tremendous opportunities.

In order to capitalize on those opportunities, successfully adapt to urban life and reduce the pervasive discrimination, the new immigrants arriving from the South required help. The Committee on Urban Conditions Among Negroes (now the National Urban League) was established on September 29, 1910 in New York City to provide assistance. Central to the organization were two remarkable people, founders **Dr. George Edmund Haynes**, who would become the Committee's first Executive Secretary and **Mrs. Ruth Standish Baldwin**.

Mrs. Baldwin was a member of one of America's oldest families and the widow of a railroad magnate, William Baldwin. Co-founder Dr. Haynes was a graduate of Fisk University, Yale University, and the first African American to receive a doctorate from Columbia University. He felt a compelling need to use his training in social work to serve his people.

A year later, the Committee merged with the Improvement of Industrial Conditions Among Negroes in New York (founded in New York in 1906), and the National League for the Protection of Colored Women (founded in 1905) to form the National League on Urban Conditions Among Negroes. In 1920, the name was later shortened to **the National Urban League**.

Professor Edwin R. A. Seligman of Columbia University, one of the leaders involved in progressive social service activities in New York City, served as chairman from 1911 to 1913 followed by Mrs. Baldwin, who took the post until 1915.

The newly formed organization counseled black migrants from the South, helped train black social workers, and worked in various ways to provide educational and employment opportunities. The League's research into the problems that African Americans faced in employment, recreation, housing, health, sanitation, and education led to organization's rapid growth. By the end of World War I the organization had 81 staff members working in 30 cities.

In 1918, Dr. Haynes was succeeded by **Eugene Kinckle Jones** who would direct the agency until his retirement in 1941. Under his leadership, the League significantly expanded its multifaceted campaign to eliminate the employment barriers that faced African Americans. The first economic discrimination developed during the boom years of the 1920s, and later during the desperate years of the Great Depression. When efforts of civil discussion were thwarted, boycotts ensued against firms that refused to employ blacks. Pressure was placed on schools to expand vocational opportunities for young people. Washington officials were urged to include blacks in New Deal recovery programs and previously segregated labor unions were encouraged to be inclusive.

As World War II loomed, **Lester Granger**, a seasoned League veteran and crusading newspaper columnist, was appointed Jones's successor. Outspoken in his commitment to advancing opportunity for African Americans, Granger pushed tirelessly to integrate the racist trade unions, and led the League's effort to support A. Philip Randolph's March on Washington Movement to fight discrimination in the defense industries. Under Granger, the League's Industrial Relations Laboratory successfully eliminated the color barrier in numerous defense operatives. The nation's demand for civilian labor during the war supported the need for the League's programs, which trained black youths for meaningful blue-collar employment. After the war, those efforts expanded to persuade Fortune 500 companies to hold career conferences on the campuses of African American colleges and place blacks in upper-echelon jobs.

Of equal importance to the League's future sources of support, Granger was an avid proponent of the organization's volunteer auxiliary, the National Urban League Guild. Under the leadership of Mollie Moon, the Guild became an important national force in its own right.

The explosion of the Civil Rights Movement provoked a change for the League, exemplified by its new leader, **Whitney M. Young, Jr.**, who became Executive Director in 1961. A social worker like his predecessors, he significantly expanded the organization's fund-raising ability—and, of critical importance was his making the League a full partner in the fight for civil rights. Although the League's tax-exempt status barred it from protest activities, the organization hosted the planning meetings of A. Philip Randolph, Martin Luther King, Jr., and other civil rights leaders for the 1963 March on Washington at its New York headquarters. Young was also a forceful advocate for greater government and private-sector efforts to eradicate poverty. His "Domestic Marshall Plan" was a ten-point program designed to close the socioeconomic gap between black and white Americans. Young greatly influenced the discussion of President Johnson's "War on Poverty" legislation. In 1971, Young died in a tragic drowning incident off the coast of Lagos, Nigeria, bringing another change in leadership to the National Urban League. **Vernon E. Jordan, Jr.**, formerly Executive Director of the United Negro College Fund, took over as the League's fifth Executive Director in 1972 (the title of the office was changed to President in 1977).

For the next decade, until his resignation in December 1981, Jordan skillfully guided the National Urban League to new heights of achievement. He oversaw the organization's expansion of social service efforts and the establishment of programs to aid the federal government's assistance in urban communities. Jordan brokered fresh initiatives in the areas of housing, health, education and minority business development. He also brought new programs such as energy, the environment, and non-traditional jobs for women of color. Jordan is also credited with developing *The State of Black America* report.

In 1982, **John E. Jacob**, a former Chief Executive Officer of the Washington, D.C. and San Diego affiliates, served as Executive Vice President of the League and expanded the

organization's outreach efforts. Jacob established the Permanent Development Fund in order to increase the organization's financial strength. In honor of Whitney Young, he established several programs to aid the development of those who work for and with the League: The Whitney M. Young, Jr. Training Center, providing training and leadership development opportunities for both staff and volunteers; the Whitney M. Young, Jr. Race Relations Program, which recognizes affiliates doing exemplary work in race relations; and the Whitney M. Young, Jr. Commemoration Ceremony, which pays tribute to long-term staff and volunteers for their extraordinary contributions.

Jacob established the National Urban League Incentives to Excel and Succeed (NULITES) to create an affiliate-based network to empower African American youth and led the League to place new emphasis on programs that reduced teenage pregnancy and helped single female heads of households, as well as programs to combat crime in black communities and increase voter registration.

Hugh B. Price was appointed to the League's top office in July 1994, taking the helm at a critical moment for the League and the nation as a whole. The fierce market-driven dynamic of globalization of the early 90s was sweeping the world, and fundamentally altering the economic relations among countries and between citizens. This social shift created enormous uncertainty among individuals and tensions among ethnic and cultural groups.

These economic changes led to the rollback of gains that African Americans made, thus the League's efforts became all the more necessary. Price, a lawyer with extensive experience in community development and public policy issues, intensified the organization's work in three broad areas: education and youth development, individual and national economic empowerment, affirmative action and the promotion of inclusion as a critical foundation for securing America's future as a democracy.

Among Price's most notable achievements was establishing the League's Institute of Opportunity and Equality in Washington, DC, which conducted a research and public policy analysis of urban issues. He also established the Campaign for African American Achievement, a community mobilization and advocacy initiative created to raise awareness and promote the importance of achievement through the formation of the National Achievers Society; in addition to creating the Doing the Right Thing recognition in local communities and the Nation Urban League's Scholarship Program.

On May 15th, 2003 the Board of Trustees of the National Urban League voted overwhelmingly to appoint former New Orleans Mayor, **Marc H. Morial**, as the league's eighth President and Chief Executive Officer. As New Orleans Chief Executive, he was one of the most popular and effective Mayors in the city's history, leaving office with a 70% approval rating. After being elected as one of the youngest Mayors in the city's history, crime plummeted by 60% and a corrupt Police Department was reformed. Morial also created new programs for youth and reignited a stagnant economy. Since his appointment to the National Urban League, Morial has worked to reenergize the movement, drawing upon its 100-year-old legacy and increasing the organization's profile both locally and nationally.

In his first year, Morial worked to streamline the organization's headquarters, securing more than \$10 million dollars in new funding to support affiliate programs. He created the first Legislative Policy Conference "NUL on the Hill", revamped the *State of Black America* report, created profitability for the Annual Conference, and secured a \$127.5 million equity fund for minority

businesses through the new markets tax credit program. Morial developed a stronger strategic direction for the organization. His “five-point empowerment agenda” focuses on closing the equality gaps for African Americans and other emerging ethnic communities in the areas of education, economic empowerment, health and quality of life, civic engagement, and civil rights and racial justice.