

Leaders of the New School: America's Young Civil Rights Heroes

By Monét Cooper, Special for AOL BlackVoices

Many of the surviving leaders of the 1960s civil rights movement have turned to careers in public service, pursued other professions, retired or become ad hoc activists (as in Jesse Jackson's case). Now, a new generation of black young people is rising to the challenges of our time, sharing a deep commitment and desire to improve the quality of life in their neighborhoods, communities and cities.

Here are 10 young, up-and-coming black leaders who, through their vocation and avocation, are positively impacting the economic, social and political life of African Americans.

Moya Bailey

Moya Bailey, a senior at Spelman College, is an advocate for eliminating inequality of any kind, but especially the discriminatory treatment of black women. She's passionate about ending the war in Iraq and politics, especially as it relates to women and people of color. Last spring, as chair of Spelman's Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance, Bailey spearheaded a protest against Nelly's 'Tip Drill' video, in which a credit card is swiped between a woman's butt cheeks, when the rapper came to campus. Bailey is still working to make sure that people understand what the protest was really about: connecting struggles, in this case, the depictions of black women in the media. Black women have been talking about representations of themselves for a long time and it really just brought it to the nation's attention. Money isn't the answer,' explains Bailey. "Just because Nelly's getting paid or women are getting paid, it's not the answer. What kind of damage is it doing to the community? What is it doing to the young women who are coming after us?"

Radcliffe Bailey

Artist Radcliffe Bailey calls his art "a quest to find out who I am." Certainly, Bailey's work is a portrait of his life as much as that of his ancestors whose photos he uses as focal points in his mixed media pieces. The Atlanta resident plies his trade on building works of art out of canvas, paint, photos and the things he says reflect life as a black citizen of the world. Bailey uses the concept of remembrance to tell his stories: An anatomical drawing of a red heart, the aorta dripping blood, is his own broken heart. The steady gaze of a young man, looking at those who look at the painting, is the shape of his past. An ancestor whose stare he has scanned and blown up to the size of life. Bailey, an assistant professor of art at the University of Georgia in Athens, Ga., paints his civil disobedience one stroke at a time, telling his autobiography with a brush, some paint, objects and a photo.

Toni Blackman

When Toni Blackman was 8 years old, she wasn't playing with dolls. She was writing poems about striking garbage workers and their trucks. Today, as a hip-hop laureate, Blackman uses her rhyme scheme to help others figure out their place in the world. She co-founded Free Style Union in 1994, a New York-based nonprofit that organizes rappers, musicians and others involved in hip-hop culture to create work that raises awareness of different cultures and backgrounds while inspiring activism. Blackman has even gotten the U.S. government into the groove. The U.S. Department of State appointed her American Cultural Specialist and Hip-Hop ambassador. She is also a

1999 fellow of Echoing Green, an organization that guides emerging leaders as they shape their organizations.

Jamal-Harrison Bryant

In many ways, African-American houses of worship were the bedrock of the civil rights movement. And the Rev. Jamal-Harrison Bryant wants to return the movement to where it began. As the pastor of Empowerment Temple in Baltimore, Bryant has mobilized churchgoers to be mentors in their neighborhoods and the prisons. His church, which he started in his living room four years ago, has reportedly grown from 43 members to 7,000. The church also has an elementary school, Empowerment Academy, that goes up to the 4th grade. In addition, Empowerment Temple runs an adult learning facility and Bryant now focuses his congregation on building wealth, by offering tools and advice his members need through workshops and credit seminars. Some would say his message -- part spiritual, part activist -- is a nod to his previous job as the director of the NAACP's Youth and College Division where he made stopping the high rate of black-on-black violence at the top of his agenda. His pop culture sensibility and love of music (he is a member of the national board for the R&B Hall of Fame) pepper his talks with a message listeners of all ages can relate to and understand. Although Bryant failed 11th grade, dropped out of high school and earned his GED, he later went to Morehouse College where he studied Political Science and International Relations. A graduate of Duke University Divinity School, Bryant is working on his Ph.D from Great Britain's Oxford University.

Jessica Care Moore

Never one to relegate her trade of writing, acting, publishing and poetically prophesying to folk who prefer their rhymes while quaffing coffee in austere galleries, Jessica Care Moore has plied her trade of word play to the tough crowds of Harlem's Apollo and international audiences in France, Berlin and London, to return performances on 'Russell Simmons' Def Poetry Jam' and with platinum-selling rapper Nas. The former journalist made a name for herself after winning 'It's Showtime at the Apollo' five times back-to-back. She discusses everything from feminism and hip-hop culture to humanism and the lives and souls of black folk. She's written two original one-woman shows and launched her own imprint, Moore Black Press, in 1997, which has published books by herself and other writers. In 2003, Moore started the Literacy Through Hip-Hop Campaign, which uses rap lyrics as a way to push the importance of reading and the power of words.

Kendrick Meek

You could say that Kendrick Meek inherited the family business. His mother is Carrie P. Meek, a member of the U.S. House of Representatives for almost a decade and an elder stateswoman of Florida politics. Meek remembers staying up with his mother, reading bills and other pieces of legislation into the early hours of the morning. That's why it's no surprise that, in 1994, he was elected to the Florida state congress. Eight years later in 2002, he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, winning the same seat his mother held for several terms. Now a member of the U.S. House Armed Services Committee and the Select Committee on Homeland Security, he is an avid supporter of Haitian causes, the voting rights of felons and other issues facing minorities.

Alisha Thomas Morgan

Alisha Thomas Morgan has grown accustomed to doing the unbelievable. In November 2002, Thomas Morgan, a Democrat, became the first black elected to the Georgia House of Representatives from the predominately white Cobb County, a county north of

Atlanta that was the former stomping ground of stalwart conservative politicians like Newt Gingrich and Bobb Barr. But her election also marked another milestone, one not just colored by race, but also by age. Thomas Morgan became the youngest serving member of the Georgia General Assembly at the age of 24. Since her term began, she has opposed a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage in Georgia, drawing criticism from fellow legislators and constituents. Thomas Morgan has been able to keep the confidence of her constituents, garnering 64 percent of the vote to beat a Republican opponent who attacked her position on the gay marriage ban. During her time in office, she has focused largely on the issues of prison reform for juveniles, education and health care.

Alicia Reece

In her hometown of Cincinnati, where turmoil between the police and its black residents have frequented national headlines in the past few years, Alicia Reece is as controversial as she is loved. In November 1999, Reece, 28 at the time, became the youngest woman in Cincinnati history to be elected to an at-large city council post. She later became the city's acting vice-mayor and was appointed vice-mayor in 2003 by Mayor Charlie Luken after placing second in the Cincinnati City Council elections. In 2002, she helped settle a racial profiling lawsuit filed against the city. The settlement provided a blueprint to improve the relationship between law enforcement and the community, including policies on the use of weapons, and a joint \$20-million commitment from the city and the Department of Justice to fund the new initiative. The daughter of entrepreneurs, Reece has also made changes to help business owners and has been an advocate for health care, lobbying for additional funding that kept community clinics open for people with little or no health insurance.

Omar Wasow

When Omar Wasow clicks his mouse, everybody listens. It goes with the territory of being one of the leading voices in technology and the Internet. As executive director and founder of Blackplanet.com, an online community for African Americans, he helped to attract more blacks online. When Oprah needed help as she made her maiden voyage into cyberspace, she called Wasow, who guided her in the 12-part series 'Oprah Goes Online.' New York television station NBC-4 and MSNBC tapped him to explain Internet trends to their viewers. When he's not debunking myths about cutting-edge technology, Wasow remains vocal in education reform and serves as a co-chair of The Coalition for Independent Public Charter Schools. Programming since he was 11 and online at the age of 12, Wasow wants children to have access to the opportunities -- and technology - he did at a young age.

B. Michael Young

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, there were 281.4 million people living in the United States. Of that number, 36.4 million of those people were African American. B. Michael Young's greatest concern is for those 21 to 40 years old, which total about 15 million people. As president of the National Urban League Young Professionals (NULYP), an auxiliary of the National Urban League, Young wants blacks to help themselves by building wealth, becoming politically active and aware, improving their health and rallying together for "racial justice." Young has served on the executive board of the Washington, D.C. chapter of the Urban League as treasurer, vice president and, from 1998 to 2000, two consecutive terms as president. Before becoming NULYP's president in September 2003, Young was a regional vice president for four consecutive years.

About the Author

Monet Cooper is a writer living in Atlanta.

Jan. 11, 2005