



A New Generation of Activists Rise to Face New Challenges

The second morning of [Young Leaders for Social Change](#) opens with an impromptu poem by Nelson, one of the participants. He recites a piece called "Ghetto Child," recounting the struggles of a childhood lived in poverty. Southern Partners Fund's Fernando Cuevas tells of his experience being a migrant worker in the fields with his parents when he was just five years old. It's a good way to begin a day of addressing shared challenges, of discussing common narratives. For over half the room, this is their first social justice conference. Half the room has been involved in community organizing for over two years. Half the room is under 25. Yet they are no strangers to struggle. A morning "armchair discussion" brings some deep conversations to the surface, followed by concurrent workshops shed light on various issues that young activists, community organizers, and nonprofit leaders are facing in their work right now.

Monica Simpson of [Resource Generation](#) moderates *Bridging the Gap: What are the Challenges We Face?* joined by panelists Jessica Norwood ([Emerging Changemakers Network](#)), Erin Byrd ([Black Workers for Justice/Fruit of Labor/Blueprint NC](#)), and Dwayne Marshall ([The Hope Institute](#)). Panelists offered insight into the challenges as well as some viable solutions.

An Unclear Path to Leadership

"Young people think they don't know who they are but everyone is going through the same journey", said Stacey, an advocate for engaging more women in politics. "I'm 28 and there are still some days where I feel like I don't know who I am." Jessica: We sometimes don't give ourselves the permission to believe that something else is possible. You want a career trajectory, more resources. But before you get to that, there's something inside of you that needs to be stirred up. We wait for someone to tell us what can be instead of listening to what's inside. You already know the answer. We're looking for someone else's story to guide us to the blueprint for how it's going to be. The blueprint is inside of you. You already have it. The opportunity we face is to believe beyond what people have told us – we have not yet tapped into the fullness of what's inside of us. You can start to see the world in very different ways. Jessica moved from NYC back to Mobile, Alabama right before Hurricane Katrina hit. The after-effects of the storm removed the "box" for her. All of a sudden, everything was possible. Ask why can't it be done? Why not? The only question is, how do we do it?

Creating a New Structure of Collaboration and Accountability

Erin: Yes, it's very important to get out the vote. But who are we voting for? Who's on the ballot? She's working on behalf of working black families, which is very different than working with middle-class NAACPers. There is a need to build access to resources, how do we create structures, processes, rules of engagement? An example of her work with Blueprint NC: everybody sees the budget, helps decide what the money is used for. How do we create spaces to work together for a common good, instead of from a place of scarcity? We can fight over scraps or work together to get the whole pie. Erin mentions a model program called HK on J, a 14-point people's agenda whose motto is, "a movement, not a moment."

Dwayne: I came from a corporate banking background. After his cousin was sentenced to life in prison, he had a personal life recalibration. Changed focus of work to urban redevelopment planning, bringing services to communities in distress. He saw too many black men involved in the penal

system, most of them high school dropouts. Realized that youth need a solid educational foundation. Got involved with the Obama campaign last year. There are various ways to be involved in social change – not just on the front lines. Problem is that often times social justice is only discussed from a “minority” prism. But Martin Luther King said that injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere. We look at the issues solely from a “me” perspective, but we need to allow others to understand and get involved with us. What about the broader Diaspora of the minority community?

Older Leaders Don't Want to Give Up Power

A young woman in the audience asks, “What about the changing of the guard? They don't want to mentor, give up the power, share the knowledge.” Erin suggests that young people really think about what exactly you want from a relationship with older leaders. Don't just say, mentor me. What do you really want to learn from this person? Keep looking for the ones that are tired. Try to figure out how to be helpful and supportive of them, and don't get discouraged the first time. Keep going back. This is about the liberation of our people. Some older people have issues with trusting young folks because they don't take us seriously – you may need to show your passion and commitment – you may need to prove it to them.

No Money, Mo' Problems

The panel discussed issues with low compensation. Jessica: Make it okay for you not to make all the cheddar. Dwayne: If you have the passion, the money will come. Find your own sweet spot. We have to fight for social change but also deal with personal change. Jessica: I own a bottled water company. Keep yourself open to other opportunities – consulting, starting a socially responsible business. There is a way to bridge business with the nonprofit movement. Push the model. If you think it's possible; it's possible.

Motivating Others for Social Change

How do you motivate and unite those that don't see the need for social change? We're usually preaching to the choir. Erin: We need to figure out the common values that people hold. A person can be passionate about one social issue, but not another. Target people where they are with the values we both share and then go from there. For example, people may care about ending racism but not care about LGBT issues. Even though we know they overlap, people don't always think that way. Monica: Come from your heart, “Here's how I feel, what about you?” Keep yourself honest and open to these ongoing conversations. Explain things to people in ways they understand. Be humble, don't dress in a suit if people might think you think you're “all that.” Meet them where they are and they'll be more likely to listen to you. Many people of color don't understand health reform. How do you break it down in a way that everyone can understand the issues? Erin: Communication is a strategy – check out DEMOS, Frameworks Institute. People think in narratives, in story, in a box. The way we communicate triggers stories in people's minds that often don't benefit us. For example, the right's call for smaller government. American people think: less taxes. Community groups think: weaker institutions to help communities. There is a cautionary word from the audience: Sharing the voices of others should not be in response to fear. Barack Obama is an example of good community organizing. But you have to stand with people. Affirm courage and encourage courage in others.

Strategic Use of Social Capital

A tall young man stands up from the [Young People's Project](#) from Jackson, Mississippi. What's the importance of networks vs. partnerships and collaborations? Jessica: There is a certain capital you have to put up to be a part of any network. An agreement you make to support your idea. Then you put in financial resources, people resources. Not the kind of networking where you pass out business cards. Use your network to move your work forward. Need to build partnerships that last beyond any particular initiative. A good example: in New Orleans, the People's Institute holds monthly roundtables on Saturday or Sunday to discuss issues affecting the community.

Panelists then offered a few final words of advice. Jessica: If you accept no, then no is the answer. Erin: Be okay being in the space between who you are and who you are becoming. Switch negative self-talk to positive things. It's okay to love deeply, be authentic and be real. Dwayne: Leadership requires vulnerability. Life is a journey. Enjoy it.

The panel also recommends a study for further thinking: [Organizing for Justice in the South](#) by the Institute for Southern Studies.

Energized and inspired, the group moves into various workshops for the remainder of the day. But not before I catch up with Charles from [Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice](#). In this short [video](#), he shares how he got involved in community organizing work. The wow factor: he was first a client benefiting from DWEJ's green jobs program, now he is one of their strongest advocates.

Anasa Trout of [GIFT](#) presents a session that seems all too important in these lean nonprofit times: *Money for the Movement: How to Raise Money and Build Movement at the Same Time*. Melissa Johnson of the [National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy](#) (NCRP) explores the different leadership styles of baby boomers and Generations X, Y, and even Z in *The Next Generation of Leadership in the Nonprofit Sector: How Will You Choose to Lead?* Emery Wright of [Project South](#) leads a workshop called *Southern Movement Building: Our History and Vision*. Participants define movement building and explore the history of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Despite the stories we hear about Rosa Parks, it was all organized. They used economic impact to their advantage to desegregate the buses. The effort lasted a whole year. **Someone asks, why doesn't this happen now?**

Angela Winfrey of the [People's Institute for Survival and Beyond](#) leads a session on *Strong Leaders: An Anti-Racist Journey for Intentional Leadership Development*. She has evacuated to Georgia from New Orleans. Her pressing questions for participants are: What keeps you at the table? What keeps your integrity? Her answer: Values and principles. It's not that "they" have to speak English but that we have to learn to speak Spanish, Vietnamese, etc. Even if we got what we wanted (i.e. reparations), we would fight over how to spend it. She encourages young people to be "liberated gatekeepers" who will give others access to money and power. One of her favorite sayings: **Who are you to close a circle that was open so wide for you?**

Donna Wellons from the Atlanta Regional Census Center comes to the stage to educate us on the importance of the 2010 Census: it's quick, easy & safe and counts all people on US soil, both documented & undocumented. All groups need to be counted. Otherwise our groups are invisible. Money to help communities is allocated based on the count. We the nonprofits have access those "hard to count" populations that typically don't trust government. I see hands shoot up in the audience when she calls for volunteers to help with next year's count.

You can tell that the day has given the group a renewed sense of responsibility to the communities they serve. Milano Harden brings the group back together with a song, smiling and clapping as the day winds to an end.

We're together again...something good is about to happen...something is in store...we're together again...

Even after a long day of learning, everyone is still smiling and still clapping, young leaders ready to go back to the world. Back to the powers they fight against, to the communities they work so hard for. But not without a final word of encouragement. Not without the voice of a poet to guide them home. Mike Molina steps in (excerpted here with permission):

we are in a world of trouble

but today

I am encouraged

Just look at what we have done

we have filled this room

with a harvest of freedom

each one of us, a dream realized

every moment of our lives

an instance of oppression defied

*every breath and utterance
a reflection of the resilience of life
despite being terrorized
brutalized and denied opportunity to thrive
our ancestors survived
reborn and alive in us*

*be encouraged
each of us
could have shut up
in the face of in-just-us
but instead we stepped up
and kept up the mission the elders left us
and the world is so messed up
sometimes we get fed up
about ready head up out the door
but then we connect up
hear stories that refresh us
and remind us of just what it is we fighting for
turn to your left and repeat
you could have been anywhere
but you are here with me
turn to your right and say
I know its hard
But we've come so far
if your heart gets heavy
Cry, wipe your eyes, and stay steady*

*be encouraged
because there aint no power like the power of the people
Cuz the power of the people **don't stop**
And we won't stop
At a black president
Won't pause for a promotion
Won't bow down or mumble humbly
We gon cause some commotion
filing motions to cease and desist
composing policy and voting
We are in motion and wont stop
Till every racist is dismissed from political office
Till we rid our cities of crime and killer cops
We apply pressure
And we will be present in government
And prepared to take to the streets
From main to wall to martin luther king*

*In your radio and on your tv
We resist the inertia of his-story
And its tendency to tame ambitions
Yeah we have come a long way
but not nearly completed our mission*

*Now Be encouraged
Keep Loving in the midst of the struggle
Keep Hoping in the twists of trouble
keep singing and playing
Dancing and praying
doing whatever brings joy into your life
keep exercising your mind
read to feed your ideas
keep seeking the divine in its glory
And in the little things
Like this gathering
We hundred worker bees
Who will be back at work come monday
be you in the streets stomping for justice
or in power writing policy
be you in schools deconstructing ignorance
or an artist creating space for visionaries
whatever you be*

*be encouraged
lift your little bit of this 7 billion
and from the bottom up we will build
a new world for our children*

*today
I am encouraged*

And so are we.

Read more about Young Leaders for Social Change

- [**Young Leaders for Social Change Opens With a Song**](#)
- [**Be the Outsider on the Inside: What Young Leaders Can Learn from Rep. Alisha Morgan**](#)
- [**A New Generation of Activists Rise to Face New Challenges**](#)