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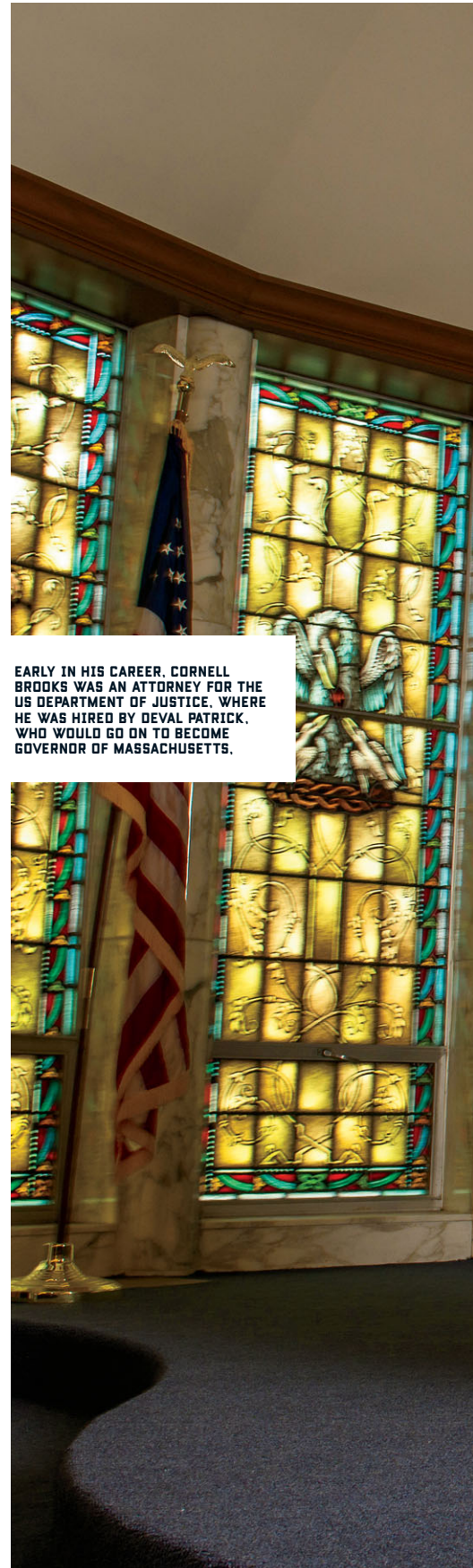
THE NAACP IS DONE

NOT

And new president Cornell William Brooks sees no reason to think that it will be done anytime soon

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EARLY IN HIS CAREER, CORNELL BROOKS WAS AN ATTORNEY FOR THE US DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE, WHERE HE WAS HIRED BY DEVAL PATRICK, WHO WOULD GO ON TO BECOME GOVERNOR OF MASSACHUSETTS.



A box of fried chicken,
a bottle of malt liquor,
and a watermelon.

**THAT
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Brooks was leading a weeklong Journey for Justice across Missouri, protesting the police shooting in August 2014 of Michael Brown, an unarmed African American teenager, in Ferguson. For most of the march, Brooks had been heartened by the hospitality of the local people, some of whom offered donuts, coffee, even shoes. But in Rosebud, things changed: the group was heckled with the N-word, and ski-masked thugs called death threats from passing cars. One heckler wore a Klan-like mask, and others planted confederate flags, along with the roadside display of fried chicken and watermelon.

A postracial America? Brooks (STH'87, Hon.'15) didn't find evidence of it in Rosebud, Mo. But as he walked alongside a septuagenarian African American woman, and a white woman who had traveled from Tennessee to march with her young children in tow, his group pressed on with what Brooks calls the characteristic intestinal fortitude of the NAACP, committed to nonviolence from its inception 106 years ago. The NAACP's stated mission has always been "to ensure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights of all persons and to eliminate race-based discrimination," and Brooks says that's the case today as much as it has ever been. Since Ferguson, Americans have seen a succession of disturbingly similar episodes, most recently the death of Freddie Gray, a black Baltimore, Md., resident who died from a spinal cord injury while in police custody. Six police officers were indicted in the case.

As for the indisputable gains in civil rights—including the election of a black president—"that progress speaks to the vigilance of the NAACP," says Brooks. "If you ask Barack Obama whether he would be where he is if not for the work of the NAACP, I think he'd answer in the negative."

Brooks, who was drawn to BU by the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. (GRS'55, Hon.'59), says it was at the School of Theology, the nation's oldest seminary of American Methodism, that he learned the philosophical underpinnings that are at the heart of the NAACP's mission.

"At BU I learned moral risk-taking and courage," he says. "The teachings of nonviolence and the belief that moral reasoning is an effective and powerful tool are ones I use to this very day, and I like to believe that we don't make any assumptions about the willingness of people to hear what we have to say."

"We see in higher education that we are at our best when we are our most diverse—women, African Americans, Latinos, Jews, everyone," says Brooks, a former student of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel (Hon.'74), BU's Andrew W. Mellon Professor Emeritus in the Humanities. And that brings us "closer to perfecting the imperfect union the founding fathers bequeathed to us, and there are some folk who are frightened by that." If anyone "accuses the NAACP of working too hard," he says, "we plead guilty."

A former senior editor at the *Yale Law Journal* and one-time Congressional candidate who comes to his post from leadership positions at the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice and the Fair Housing Council of Greater



AS THE NAACP'S NEW PRESIDENT, BROOKS WAS OFTEN ASKED HOW HE WOULD MAKE THE ORGANIZATION RELEVANT. "IT WASN'T ALWAYS THE FIRST QUESTION, BUT IT WAS ONE OF THE FIRST THREE QUESTIONS."

Washington, Brooks was a lawyer for the US Department of Justice, hired by a rising attorney named Deval Patrick (Hon.'14), who would go on to become the governor of Massachusetts. Also a fourth-generation minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Brooks is the 18th leader in the history of an organization spawned at the height of Jim Crow. In the early 1900s, the NAACP launched its legal battle to end segregation—then upheld by the US Supreme Court—under the leadership of civil rights lawyer Charles Hamilton Houston, who was dean of Howard University Law School and whose protégé was future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall. A string of victories followed, including the court-ordered desegregation of the University of Maryland Law School in 1936, the striking down of racially restrictive covenants on home sales in 1948, and the NAACP's greatest victory, the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, in which the nation's highest court ruled that segregation in public schools violated the 14th Amendment. Today, NAACP lawyers are juggling civil actions against racial discrimination in employment, housing, criminal justice, voting rights, and more than a half century after *Brown*, education.

Many of the recent NAACP initiatives have garnered little attention from the national press, which has often chosen instead to bemoan the organization's perceived

decline. "What will you do," they repeatedly asked the new president, "to make the NAACP relevant?" Brooks says "it wasn't always the first question, but it was always one of the first three."

He says the organization is not just relevant: it is essential and vital—its reach is vast and its agenda urgent. The nation "has stepped forward, but at this moment we've stepped backward," he says. With "the peeling back of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, mass incarceration of people of color, zero tolerance laws, racially biased voter ID requirements, and a pandemic of police misconduct," he sees in America today a "new Jim Crow."

"If you look at the last generation, we've seen social and economic stratification of our society," says Brooks. "Racial segregation in our schools rivals what it was in the 1960s, and class stratification is growing by the day." According to the NAACP, about 35 percent of African American students attend high-poverty schools, compared with 4 percent of whites. In 2011, more than 40 percent of black students attended schools that were 90 percent or more minority, an increase of more than 5 percent from 1991.

Brooks argues that at the time of the 50th anniversary of Bloody Sunday—when peaceful civil rights demonstrators attempted to march to the Alabama state capital and were attacked by police on Selma's Pettus Bridge—"we have a Congress honoring the civil rights foot soldiers of yesteryear

NUMBERS VS. THE MYTH OF POSTRACIAL AMERICA

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the Ku Klux Klan has 5,000 to 8,000 active members. A 2014 *Washington Post*/ABC poll found that just 2 out of 10 African Americans believe the police treat blacks and whites equally, whether or not they've committed a crime.

At this writing, Congress refuses to approve changes to the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which states have used, in defiance of the law's intention, to clearly discriminate against black Americans. In 2013 a US Supreme Court ruling struck down Section 4 of the landmark civil rights law, which designates the parts of the country that must have changes to their voting laws cleared by the federal government or in federal court.

And the realities of imprisonment of African Americans are

The NAACP is working to correct disparities in sentencing, as well as policies that favor whites over blacks

26%



Percent of juvenile arrests

44%



Percent of youth who are detained

46%



Percent of youth judicially waived to criminal court

58%



Percent of youth admitted to state prisons

grimmer still. One in three African Americans can expect to be incarcerated in their lifetime. Blacks now constitute nearly one million of the nation's total 2.3 million incarcerated population and are incarcerated at nearly six times the rate of whites, according to the NAACP's criminal justice statistics.

For young African Americans the picture is getting worse by the year, says Cornell William Brooks (STH'87, Hon.'15), president and CEO of the NAACP. Nationwide, African Americans represent 26 percent of juvenile arrests, 44 percent of the youth who are detained, 46 percent of the youth who are judicially waived to criminal court, and 58 percent of the youth admitted to state prisons, according to the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice. ss

while refusing to commit to amending a flawed Voting Rights Act today.”

Michael Curry, president of the NAACP's Boston chapter, says when one looks at any indicator of quality of life today—unemployment, health disparities, mortality and morbidity rates, representation in clinical trials, education, or the wealth gap—African Americans are still facing many of the barriers they faced in the 1960s.

With an annual budget of \$87 million, a staff of 100, an army of lawyers and researchers, and 2,000 state, city, college, high school, and even prison-based chapters, the NAACP is fueled largely by membership dues of \$30 or less, individual donors, and so-called corporate “partners,” which in the last 30 years have included McDonald's, Coca-Cola, Comcast, Time Warner, Wal-Mart, and Exxon. The organization works with not just African American organizations such as the Urban League, but with the Anti-Defamation League and the League of Women Voters.

“We are really the nation's primary care physicians when it comes to civil rights,” says the 53-year-old Brooks. “Whether or not CNN or MSNBC follow what we do, we do it day in and day out. Let's look at Missouri, where the Department of Justice issued a scathing report describing profound racial disparities in Ferguson, an unholy trinity of courts, police, and city hall. Where did this evidence come

from? From a 2014 state racial profiling law co-written by the NAACP.”

That law, similar to others popping up around the nation, prohibits the police practice of routinely stopping members of minority groups for violations of vehicle laws—what some activists call “driving while black”—as a pretext for investigating other criminal violations. It also mandates detailed reporting on arrests so they can be reviewed for racially based patterns and bias.

In the wake of the 2012 killing in Florida of African American teenager Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman, the NAACP drew up a series of bills to end racial profiling, repeal stand-your-ground laws, and promote law enforcement accountability. The organization also opened a call center to log public complaints alleging racial bias by police after several Fort Lauderdale officers were fired over racist videos and text messages.

In April, the NAACP was again called to action when a black Coast Guard veteran, Walter L. Scott, was shot to death in North Charleston, S.C., while running from a white police officer who had stopped him for having a broken taillight. “The narrative of excessive force and police brutality continues to permeate headlines and command our collective attention,” Brooks said at the time. He vowed that the NAACP South Carolina State Conference would

work with federal and local authorities “to ensure that a full and thorough investigation takes place, and that justice is served.”

THE NEXT GENERATION

As it continues to battle more than century-old patterns of prejudice, the organization knows it must enlist a new generation of African Americans whose knowledge of the civil rights movement’s heyday comes largely from movies.

“For me, the relevance issue is about making the case to communities about our importance for younger people,” says 48-year-old Curry, who is also legislative affairs director and senior counsel at the Massachusetts League of Community Health Centers and an NAACP national board member who served on the committee that hired Brooks.

The main reason the NAACP endures, he says, is “we don’t just say to young people, ‘come on board’; we make them leaders.” In fact, the NAACP’s national board of 64 includes 7 members under age 20. “The challenge for us, a historical minute after the Pettus Bridge,” he says, “is how do we wipe out the vestiges of racism in the minds of Americans and in institutions today? That’s a lofty way of saying we’ve got a lot more work to do, because black people are dying.”

In a nod to this new generation, the NAACP leadership has embraced social media, mobilizing through Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Tumblr. From its support of the Scott sisters (African Americans who were sentenced to life for a Mississippi robbery that netted \$11 and who were released in 2011 on the condition that one donate a kidney to the other) to the Stand for Freedom campaign against human trafficking to #TooMuchDoubt (with its unsuccessful push to stay the Georgia execution of Troy Davis, who had been convicted of murdering a police officer), the NAACP used social media to tell its story.

The press that thronged Brooks at the outset of his leadership almost unanimously suggested it might be time for a complete rebranding of the organization. There is, after all, the matter of the name: the National Association for the Advancement of *Colored* People. Brooks explains patiently: It’s not an anachronism; despite its origins, the term reflects the fact that “we support, defend, and advocate for an America for people of all colors.” He notes that of the NAACP’s founders, a group of intellectuals credited with drastically decreasing racist murders, only one was African American. Its motto—working for social justice “from the ballot box to the classroom”—reflects its ambitious sweep, from affirmative action to affordable health care.

Long active in the fight against the HIV epidemic, the NAACP has also launched a public-school based educational campaign to prevent and battle obesity among African Americans. The organization flexed some serious muscle in the fight for passage of the Affordable Care Act, and received a \$150,000 Robert Wood Johnson grant to supplement its locally based push for increased enrollment in major cities across America. “We’ve supported causes involving the rights of people with disabilities, women, and the environment,” says Brooks.

For Hardin Coleman, dean of the BU School of Education and the son of Harvard Law School graduate William T. Coleman, Jr. (Hon.’10), who as a young attorney was on the legal team that argued *Brown v. Board of Education* for the NAACP, the challenge today is all about economic opportunity. Hardin Coleman says groups like the NAACP need to step up their focus on broadening and upgrading what he calls “the pipeline to productivity”—affordable health care and more equity in school funding, yes, but also community action to enable people of color to own small businesses and run banks, hire their own, and develop the kind of social connections whites have long benefited from—networks that pave the way for their children to have a firm foothold in the middle class. “The structural barriers are no longer as high,” he says. “We’re into the cultural barriers now.” Coleman points out that few prominent African Americans achieved their status through corporate leadership; most are in the professions.

As Brooks sees it, many of those cultural barriers have housing segregation at their foundation. “Let’s be clear,” he says. “You can’t talk about educational integration without talking about housing segregation. In the foreclosure crisis, we saw an African American middle class with good credit being led into bad mortgages, leading to segregation in housing and lending, which fuels segregation in education.”

Consequently, says Brooks, the NAACP leadership has been meeting with financial industry leaders, including Citibank and Bank of America, to focus on building credit, supporting establishment of black and minority-owned banks, and promoting responsible small lending. The organization has helped to win a \$15 minimum wage for workers at Seattle-Tacoma Airport and has fought discrimination in payments to homeowners of color hit by Hurricane Sandy. It also waged a 2014 state-by-state campaign to eliminate the “Have you ever been arrested?” box from job applications; “yes” replies have blocked the way for African Americans significantly more than their white counterparts, Brooks says.

Curry likens America’s widespread presumption of a postracial environment to a dysfunctional family, one where “Aunt Jamie just wants to believe it’s all done, there was no physical abuse, there was no neglect.

“America is full of folks who just want to say, ‘Forget about it’ and move on,” he says. “They want to believe there aren’t people who are still overtly racist, or who are covertly racist—entrenched in a white supremacist view that if you’re not white, you’re not equal.”

Brooks has come to see the dynamics of race relations in America as a kind of “Newtonian law” at play—an equal and opposite act of injustice for every act of justice. “We see a reactionary pandemic of police misconduct, a Machiavellian frenzy of voter disenfranchisement with irrational voter ID laws.” He believes that sometimes “we’re afraid of the America we can be. Rather than welcome a democracy that is multiethnic and multiracial, there are those who believe our democracy is most true when it is most homogeneous,” he says. And in America, heterogeneous from its founding, that’s never been true. ■