

Young and Seasoned Civil Rights Warriors Tell Black Press 'We Need You'

Written by Helen Trice Edney
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Two civil rights warriors from vastly different generations have told the nation's largest association of Black newspapers that the Black Press is sorely needed to lead Black people out of a quagmire of modern-day injustices – some from the outside and some self-inflicted.

"Illiteracy, poverty, out-of-wedlock rates, the incarceration rates are going to take away the last 50 or 60 years of progress if the Black community and Black adults and the Black Press and Black churches don't stand up and say no," Marian Wright Edelman, 73, told an audience of Black publishers at the National Newspaper Publishers Association Foundation's Newsmaker of the Year dinner.

Edelman, founder, president/CEO of the Children's Defense Fund was the Lifetime Achievement Award winner. She outlined what she described as "the living hell" that veteran civil rights leaders went through to gain rights for Black people; then – listing shocking education and incarceration statistics - pleaded with the audience to not allow the gains to be lost.

Among the statistics she said cited: The "toxic cocktail of illiteracy – 80 percent of Black children cannot read or compute at grade level in fourth, eighth or 12th grade." She added that one in three Black boys is at risk of going to prison in their lifetime.

"We've got to reweave the fabric of family and reweave the fabric of community and teach our children what they need to know to survive," she said. "We can't wait for the public schools to do their jobs. We've got to do it...If we don't do it, no one else is going to do it."

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Just before the award to the seasoned Edelman, who founded CDF in 1973 and once worked with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the much younger NAACP Benjamin Todd Jealous, 39, had received the Community Service Award with a strikingly similar message on a different topic.

“We need you right now to be fighting as hard as ever,” said Jealous, the youngest NAACP president in history. “These are tough times for our people. Our history has taught us that we can get whatever we’re fighting for at that moment and lose everything that we have at the same time.”

He continued, “Think about the civil rights movement. We’ve got the right to be a cop in any city in this country and yet lost safe communities in virtually every city in this country. We got the ability to work for corporations on any level and yet lost many of our own corporations. And at this moment as we’re fighting to get jobs for our young people and improve our schools and make our communities safe again, they’re out there taking away access to the ballot box state after state after state.”

The Newsmaker dinner is the staple event of NNPAF’s Black Press Week. NNPA has a membership of more than 200 Black-owned newspapers across the country. Civil rights leader Rev. Al Sharpton, named Newsmaker of the Year, was still in Alabama after a commemoration of the historic Selma to Montgomery voting rights march, according to a member of his staff.

A day earlier, Jealous had returned from Geneva where he and an NAACP delegation had asked the United Nations to investigate “rogue” new voting laws sweating the U. S., laws that some contend could disenfranchise at least 5 million people.

“We have just seen more states passing more laws pushing more people out of the ballot box than we have seen in any year in the past century in this country,” Jealous recounted his testimony at the U.N. “And so we must really, in this moment, all be vigilant, all be finding ways to work together to turn this ship around.”{jcomments on}