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Titans' of the Civil Rights Movement Pass Down Valuable Lessons

By Edna Kane-Williams, Vice President, Multicultural Markets, AARP

When Nolan Rollins was fresh out of law school in the late 1990s he was introduced to Howard Henderson, president/CEO of the Baltimore Urban League. Returning to his home town of Baltimore, Nolan had no idea what was about to happen.

But, in a matter of just a few years, with a lot of humility, listening and good mentoring, he had zoomed into the civil rights and economic justice career of a lifetime.

"I was one of the younger folks who was really fortunate to be surrounded by really seasoned civil rights leaders. And, really, that's what pulled me into this," says Rollins. Being groomed by Henderson, he went on to found the now 7,000-member National Urban League Young Professionals program. Then, at 34, he rebuilt the New Orleans Urban League as its president/CEO for five years after Hurricane Katrina. And last year, he became the new president/CEO of the Los Angeles Urban League. With these accomplishments, Nolan seems to have shocked himself.

"Quite frankly, when I came back to Baltimore from law school in Florida, my intention was to go into the legal profession, which I did. I was in the State's Attorney's Office," he said. But once he was introduced to Henderson, who had worked at the Baltimore-based National NAACP office under the leadership of Benjamin Hooks for 15 years before going to the Urban League, Nolin was hooked on a whole new career.

It's a phenomenal civil rights culture that appears to repeat itself: Older, seasoned generations of civil rights leaders duplicating themselves to continue the work for years to come - generation after generation - assuring that the quest for civil rights and economic justice continues.

"All the time, I'm surrounded by these Titans in the Urban League movement who really brought me into the room, sat me down and I actually got a great chance to learn from them," he said, crediting names such as Henderson and NUL President/CEO Marc Morial.

"They were ready to support a younger generation of civil rights and economic rights individuals."

This strategy of simply identifying people with talent and commitment and then grooming them appears to be working among the nation's civil rights groups.

Sammie Dow, 27, current director of the Youth & College Division of the NAACP, has a similar story. His first role models were his parents, who were active in the local NAACP in High Point, N.C., where he grew up.

"I started by volunteering as a youth usher for my local unit's annual Freedom Fund Banquet," he said. "And it was for me an eye-opening experience. In the eighth grade, I was awarded our local unit's Outstanding Youth of the Year Award.

Now with a master's degree in social work, Sammie spends long hours at the NAACP engulfed in the search for new ways to engage young people in the business of voting rights, stopping gun violence and other civil rights issues. He treasures the lessons he has learned from elder civil rights leaders.

"One of the most dangerous things that our community can do is to create this battle of us against them - old against the young. I think it's extremely divisive and it's dangerous to the community because it creates an opportunity for infighting and we're not focused on what our real target should be."

He described how the Youth & College Division and the youth councils and college chapters work directly with the adult branches; "so, that structuring really allows an opportunity for young people to be at the decision-making tables, even helping to shape the work of the adult branches. Not to mention that we have dedicated seats on our national board of directors."

Like, Rollins, Dow sees the civil rights movement being transferred through the generations simply by partnerships between seasoned workers being willing to teach and younger workers being willing to learn.

"The view that I bring to civil rights is that there's enough room at the table for everyone. And if we all do a little, no one has to do a lot. And I think that encouraging young people to work alongside adults, that's the model we have to get to. Some things are not taught. Some things are caught. When young people have an

opportunity to work alongside adults, they catch really valuable lessons.”
