

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

NAACP Fights to Keep Struggle Alive

Civil rights group marks 100 years

(AP) -- The bookends of the NAACP's century testify to the change it has wrought.

In 1908, a race riot in Springfield, Ill., left at least seven people dead and led to the birth of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. In 2008, Barack Obama, who had launched his campaign just blocks from where Springfield's blood once spilled, became the first African-American president.

In between, wielding legal arguments and moral suasion in equal measure, the NAACP demanded that America provide liberty and justice not only for blacks, but for all. Now, its very achievements have created a daunting modern challenge as the NAACP turns 100 on Thursday: convincing people that the struggle continues.

"When I was in college, I could see signs that said 'white' and 'colored' when I went to the movie theater. That was an easy target for me to aim at," says Julian Bond, chairman of the NAACP board. "Today, I don't see those signs, but I know that these divisions still exist ... and it's more difficult to convince people that there's a problem."

Benjamin Todd Jealous, the new president and CEO of the NAACP, says his greatest obstacle is "the lack of outrage about the ways that young people and working people are routinely mistreated."

He cites figures such as a 70 percent unsolved murder rate in some black communities, blacks graduating from high school at a far lower rate than whites, and studies showing that whites with



Medgar Evers, 37, Mississippi field secretary for the NAACP was shot and killed in Jackson, Miss. On June 12, 1963, while returning home from an integration rally.

criminal records get jobs easier than blacks with clean histories.

"There are issues of basic fairness, obstacles to opportunity, that still exist," Jealous says. "The NAACP is needed now as urgently as it has ever been."

No one group did more to pave the way for Obama's ascension than the NAACP, historians say, pointing to its primary role in three towering civil rights victories — the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* school desegregation ruling, the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

But now that the black son of a poor single mother has moved into the White House, a new era has clearly begun.

"We've got to rise to the occasion today," says former NAACP board chairman Myrlie Evers-Williams, who was married to the slain civil rights icon Medgar Evers.

"We cannot continue to sing 'We Shall Overcome,'" she says. "It's a dear, valued, valuable song that expresses a time that should live with us. But I want a new song."

The first incarnation of the NAACP was the Niagara Movement, a 1905 conference of prominent blacks led by the



Thurgood Marshall, then chief legal counsel of the NAACP, is surrounded by students and their escort from Little Rock, Ark., on Aug. 22, 1958. The group is on the steps of the Supreme Court Building in Washington, D.C., right after Marshall filed an appeal in the integration case of Little Rock's Central High School.



W.E.B. Du Bois, educator, writer and co-chairman of the U.S. delegation, addresses the World Congress of Partisans of Peace in Paris, France, on April 22, 1949.

scholar and activist W.E.B. DuBois. After the Springfield riots, Niagara members joined a group of mostly white Northerners to form the NAACP on Feb. 12, 1909 — the centennial of Abraham Lincoln's birth.

An early focus of the group was the hundreds of lynchings taking place each year. In 1917, the NAACP won its first Supreme Court case, a unanimous ruling that states could not segregate people into residential districts based on race.

This was an early example of perhaps the NAACP's most powerful argument: Equal rights are a fundamentally American value.

"We are the only country that

was founded on an idea or a premise ... the notion of equal citizenship," says Taylor Branch, the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian of the civil rights movement. "Pretty much all of our history has tested what that meant. Most often the greatest crises have been around race."

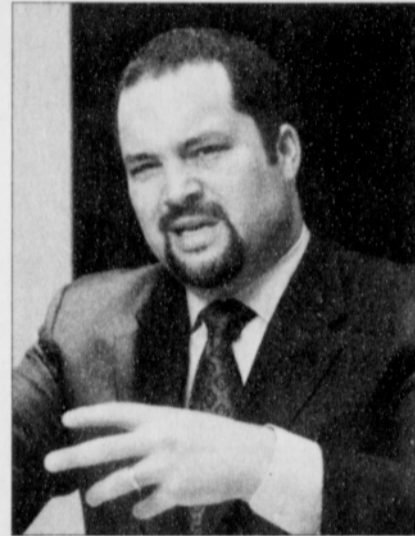
The NAACP framed its arguments as "civil rights doesn't mean black rights, it means rights pertaining to citizenship," Branch says.

This stance provided huge

University history professor. Those legal victories laid a foundation for many different groups to demand equal protection under the law.

"It spread to women, disabled groups, the elderly," Branch says. "Most Americans are unaware of the things that it sparked, not just by other groups, but in areas other than school desegregation or race relations."

The great triumphs of the Civil and Voting Rights Acts



Benjamin Jealous is the current president of the NAACP and the youngest leader to guide the Civil Rights organization.

moral leverage. "Their power came from knowing they were right," Bond says.

Power also came from thousands of average citizens who risked retaliation to challenge unjust laws.

"Thurgood Marshall's brilliance was the instrument of victory, but that brilliance was essentially rooted in the courage of ordinary farmers and workers," says William Chafe, a Duke

marked the end of an era. After the 1960s, some of the NAACP's most significant post-'60s achievements, according to a timeline on the NAACP Web site, include helping keep conservative Robert Bork off the Supreme Court and ex-Klansman David Duke out of the U.S. Senate; registering hundreds of thousands of voters; leading marches; and pushing the issue of diversity in corporations and on television.



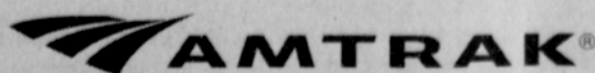
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