

## Urban League conference: Blacks must have a vision

By **Tim O'Neil**

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

07/29/2007



Seating was full inside the Ferrara Theatre as four Democratic presidential candidates spoke Friday at the National Urban League conference at America's Center in downtown St. Louis. The four-day event attracted nearly 10,000 people.

*(Robert Cohen/P-D)*

The spotlight was on politics at the National Urban League conference in St. Louis last week, but the agenda was all about expanding opportunity for black Americans.

From pundits to preachers and from executives to teachers, three ideas echoed — lifting up the poor, answering the call to lead and achieving independence through financial success. The theme of the four-day convention that ended Saturday was equally to the point: "You, Your Money, Your Future."

If the NAACP is known for advocacy in the courtroom and through protest, the emphasis of the more button-down Urban League leans toward economic policy and individual empowerment. Consider two of Friday's workshops: "Entrepreneurship 201, Putting a Real Deal Together," and "Six-figure Careers You Never Thought About."

"Our goal is economic parity," said James Buford, longtime president of the hosting Urban League of Metropolitan St. Louis. "We still have too many African-American people who are disenfranchised. As we help motivate more into the middle class, they become independent and viable citizens. They spend money in the community and motivate the next generation.

"That's economic empowerment for the future."

At every turn, the messages were forceful, often passionate:

— The Rev. Jesse Jackson spoke in his vintage preacher's cadence of the powers of racism during a discussion on the "Crisis of the Black Male." Others gave stirring pleas for blacks to take more responsibility for themselves and their communities. Both sentiments won loud approval from the audience.

— A professor at Princeton University warned young black professionals against a "narcissistic" temptation to seek personal wealth without concern for the less fortunate. He chided the "post-Soul" generation for having a "vision deficit."

— Panels of successful businessmen and women offered advice on moving up in the corporate world. Their audiences peppered them with earnest questions about taking those first steps up the corporate ladder.

During the meeting that attracted roughly 10,000 people, the Urban League released a 10-point "Opportunity Compact" that combines many longtime goals: mandatory pre-school education, tax-free savings accounts for home down payments, expanded education for ex-offenders and alliances between big corporations and minority-owned businesses. In theory, the presidential candidates were supposed to use the compact as a checklist for their own policy pronouncements.

After the political speeches and award events, the biggest draw was the panel on the black male crisis. A standing-room-only crowd heard Jackson and nine other speakers discuss the issues raised this year by the Urban League, among them: Black men, when compared to white men, are twice as likely to be unemployed and earn 74 percent the pay. Black men also are seven times more likely to be in jail or prison, nine times more likely to be killed by firearms and eight times more likely to die of AIDS.

Jackson discussed the inequities of urban life.

"Urban America is like a donut, and the people on the ring have summer school and jobs and camping and horseback riding," Jackson said. "The people in the hole don't, and it's obvious what the result will be."

Other speakers focused on aspiration and hard work. Jeff Johnson, a host on the BET television network, even scolded some at the conference "for spending more time on lunch and concerts than on dealing with issues." He called upon all blacks to become more involved in their schools.

"I am not mad at integrated schools. I'm mad at integrated schools with no black parents at PTA meetings," Johnson said. "If our homes don't do their jobs, the police will. If our schools don't do their jobs, the jails will."

Jeff Henderson, an author and master chef in Las Vegas, said that was his rocky path. The audience was silent as he recounted his prison time for drug offenses and his struggle to succeed. Henderson said while he was head chef at two casinos, he hired other ex-offenders.

He said he bluntly tells young black men who want work: "Pull your pants up, get a belt. Most people in (human resources) are from the middle class. You have to make some changes to get a job."

During another session, Eddie Glaude Jr., a professor of religion at Princeton University, told a room filled with young professionals that their generation needs to step into community leadership. Glaude said the tactics of the civil rights era of the 1950s and '60s may not work today but warned, "Today, it seems we have a vision deficit."

"Have we become narcissistic, self-aggrandizing Negroes waiting to get a place at the table so we can turn our backs on those in need?" he asked. "Many of us have access that black America never had before. Yet we still see so much suffering. ..."

"What are you going to do, young folks?" Glaude said.

Befitting the Urban League's themes, a highlight was the granting of its Business Pioneer Award to David L. Stewart, chairman of World Wide Technology Inc. of Maryland Heights. Stewart, a native of Clinton, Mo., said he arrived in St. Louis in 1973 with "a big Afro," a duffel bag, bell-bottom jeans and Converse sneakers.

"As you can tell, I needed a lot of help," he said. Stewart said the Urban League got him a job with the Boy Scouts of Greater St. Louis.

He founded his company in 1990. Last year, it had \$2 billion in sales.