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## ISIAAH Institute Cultivating the Power of Youth to Change Their World

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ISIAAH INSTITUTE CULTIVATING THE POWER OF YOUTH TO CHANGE THEIR  
WORLD



*Le Musée de f.p.c.*

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by Anitra D. Brown



It does not matter if one is talking about the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s or the Black Lives Matter Movement of today, one common thread cannot be ignored—the active role of students and other young people in acts of protest and civil disobedience to draw attention to injustice and inequality in an effort to change the world around them.

Perhaps there is something about the energy, dedication and even optimism of youth who believe that they can indeed make a difference by raising their voices that make their roles in social justice movements critical and pivotal.

To be sure, it was the presence and in cases the ultimate sacrifice of young people in the battle for equality at lunch counters and in voting booths that helped to make the Civil Rights Movement effective on the legislative and judicial fronts, ensuring that African-Americans were granted the same legal rights as White Americans. But in other social areas—housing, income, issues related to criminal justice, access to quality education—inequity and injustice persist.

Today, groups like Black Lives Matter work—spurred by the killing of Black teen Trayvon Martin and the subsequent acquittal of his killer George Zimmerman and fueled by similar events across the country, have been victorious at drawing attention to the marginalization of Black bodies especially as it relates to police brutality, vigilante violence, and the criminal justice system. They have also been criticized, mostly by those who fail or refuse to understand that drawing attention to the marginalization of Black lives does not undercut all others. While the broad, inclusive and loosely organized group often focuses on protests and demonstrations, some of its

leaders also understand that social change must happen from the outside and the inside as evidenced by Black Lives Matters' DeRay McKesson's run for Baltimore mayor.

Though McKesson came in sixth in the Democratic primary, his campaign has still been viewed as a win for Black Lives Matter in the effort to turn outside agitation and protest into power. Meanwhile, recent activism by young people has also refocused on the strength of Black economic power with the resurgence of Black Dollars Matter movements.

Still, the question remains. After the protests and dialogue, even after the new laws and successful court cases, what is next? How is protest and even policy transformed into progress?

## ISIAIAH INSTITUTE ENGAGES IN LOCAL EFFORT



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Well, one local organization is working to focus on that very matter by bringing together local high school and college students to discuss strategies and methods for using protest to impact community.

On April 2, more than 200 local university students from Xavier, Dillard, Loyola <sup>^</sup> and Tulane universities and the University of New Orleans along with students from St.

Augustine and Ben Franklin high schools came together to launch the development of the Isaiah Institute of New Orleans (IINO) Student Civic Engagement Strategy to impact issues and community change beyond peaceful protests.

Joe Givens, executive director of The Isaiah Institute, an interfaith organization of local religious congregations, worked with student delegates to organize the civic convening. And the organization will provide next steps for the student delegates including follow-up training to prioritize issues of concern, continue gathering information and research and identifying the various sources of government authority, influence and responsibility that have the power to effect change.

“There is great momentum among our high school and college students to engage in social actions that impact real community change,” Givens says. “We are moving quickly forward to formulate additional details of the Student Civic Engagement Strategy. Our delegates have hit the ground running with steps to be taken during this session of the Louisiana Legislature, including requesting a meeting with the Governor John Bel Edwards’s office to discuss TOPS and putting plans in place to initiate voter education and registration campaigns on every campus.”

One thing the Isaiah Institute is steadfast regarding is the use of peaceful protest and organizing as the springboard for affecting change, drawing on a passage from the Bible, Isaiah 58:2, to substantiate its mission.

“We believe that Black Lives Matter. We believe that blue lives matter,” Givens says. “But God matters most. Faith matters. And that is what this movement is about.”

The April 2 meeting was held in conjunction with the University of New Orleans External Communications Department and featured a number of participants, including New Orleans native, former Atlanta mayor and former Ambassador Andrew Young, former Eastern District of Louisiana United States Attorney Ken Polite, Orleans Parish Sheriff Marlin Gusman and National Urban League President and former Mayor of New Orleans Marc H. Morial, who participated via taped message.

Givens was hopeful that youth participants would gain much from Young’s experience and insight. To be sure, the 85-year-old civil rights legend knows first hand the work and sacrifice that is required to fight for a cause, while also successfully transitioning to a position of protest to a position of power.

After graduating from Howard University and earning his degree in divinity from Hartford Seminary in Connecticut, Young was appointed to serve as pastor of a series of churches throughout Alabama. It was during this time that his interest in the

concept of nonviolent resistance as a strategy for social change grew and he became an ally of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In 1960, he joined the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). After moving to New York for a brief period, he returned to the South, moving to Atlanta. In 1964, Young was named executive director of the SCLC. He played a key role in several Civil Rights campaigns, helping to strategize and organize demonstrations across southern cities, including Birmingham, Ala.; St. Augustine, Fla.; Selma, Ala.; and Atlanta. It was this work and other protests and demonstrations that help to bring about the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

After an unsuccessful bid two years earlier, Young ran for Congress in 1972, won and was re-elected in 1974 and in 1976. In 1977, Pres.

Jimmy Carter appointed Young as the United States Ambassador to the United Nations, making Young the first African-American to hold the position. In 1981, Young ran for and was elected mayor of Atlanta, a city in which he was arrested for civil rights protests less than 20 years earlier. As mayor of Atlanta, he brought in \$70 billion of new private investment, continuing the work of his predecessor Maynard Jackson in expanding programs to include minority and female-owned businesses in all city contracts. Young was re-elected as Mayor in 1985 with more than 80 percent of the vote.

Young shared some of his thoughts on civic engagement and protest as a means to change the world with a group of New Orleanians the day before the student meeting, passing on nuggets of wisdom as he spoke to about 70 people gathered at the home of Jimmie and Judge Regina Woods for a meet and greet and fundraiser event for the Isaiah Institute.

With a handful of the youth who would participate in the next day's events also on hand, Young shared his thoughts on what it takes to effectively use protest to make a difference in community.

On one hand, he evoked a lesson learned during his work alongside Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

"In order to be free, you have to overcome the love of money and the fear of death," Young said.

Then, recalling a tenet passed on to him by his father, he cautioned that opera with intellect was better than operating in anger. ^

"Don't get mad, get smart," he told the crowd.

# ORGANIZATION'S PROJECTS

The Isaiah Institute's Student Civic Engagement Strategy is just one of the organization's projects and services. In fact, IINO offers several faith-based initiatives to improve the quality of life for individuals.

Young Lions offers local youth the chance to enhance their communication and leadership skills through learning and practice. Participants receive year-round training and participate in retreat gatherings and other workshops throughout New Orleans. As part of the program, participants are supported in creating peace projects in their communities. Current activities include intercultural and interfaith in facilitating youth dialogue.

The NOLA Interfaith Peace Initiative involves more than 50 communities of faith collaborating to promote peace into New Orleans.

The Youth & Young Adult Incubator helps serve the needs of unemployed youth and struggling entrepreneurs, as well as formerly incarcerated citizens and their families as well. In 2017 the Isaiah Institute's partnerships with the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and the Orleans Justice Center has produced a constant flow of returning citizens and their families to our offices and the incubator. The incubator served nearly 200 returning citizens with resume planning and job searches in 2016.

Also, the Isaiah Institute of New Orleans provides organizing training and technical assistance to the St. Vincent De Paul's re-entry organizing project, which is a five-state initiative of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development designed to serve the needs of formerly incarcerated citizens and their families. The organization is also joining with global communities to share how it makes democracy work. In 2016 the Isaiah Institute in conjunction with the New Orleans Diplomacy Council and the U.S. State Department, hosted 41 diplomats from 23 countries in a half dozen meetings.

As for the Isaiah Institute's Student Civic Engagement Strategy, students will continue to meet with mini-organizing camps to be held throughout the summer. A second comprehensive meeting focusing on student civic engagement will take place in the early fall where the student delegates will present their Student Civic Engagement Strategy to the business and government community, Givens says.



Givens considers it all a part of the organization's mission.

“This is nothing we have just started today,” he says. “We have done this for many years. We’re hoping to get better.”

For more information on IINO or to contribute to the organization’s initiatives, call 504-416-0679 or visit [www.isaiahnola.com](http://www.isaiahnola.com).



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M	T	W	T	F	S	S		
1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
8	9	10	11	12	13	14		
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