

## **Social Work and Civil Rights: The Legacy of Whitney M. Young, Jr.**

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### **Abstract**

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*Whitney Young was a social worker and civil rights leader who gained prominence in the 1960s for transforming the National Urban League into a vibrant civil rights organization. Young drowned tragically while attending a conference in Nigeria in 1971. This year marks the 50th anniversary of his untimely death at the age of 49. Young was the Dean of the School of Social Work at Atlanta University and the president of the National Association of Social Workers. As the leader of the Urban League, he served as an advisor to President John F. Kennedy, President Lyndon B. Johnson, and President Richard M. Nixon. He had a significant impact on public policy. Young left a strong legacy in education, civil rights, and urban renewal.*

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### **I. Introduction**

In 1915, educator Abraham Flexner declared that social work was not a profession. As a result, the profession of social work has primarily focused on micro and mezzo level practice. Social work has focused on developing a distinct body of knowledge as it relates to engaging, assessing, and treating individuals and families (Carten, 2021). Consequently, social work has had a limited impact on broad, community empowerment. Many graduate programs of social work have focused on developing psychotherapists who focus on private clinical practice. Whitney Young urged the social work profession to not abandon its historic mission to serve the poor and remain vigorous advocates for social justice and catalysts for comprehensive societal change. The career of Whitney Young concentrated on macro level change in social work education, civil rights, and racial justice.

### **Review of the Literature**

#### **2. Lincoln Institute/Kentucky State**

Whitney Young was initially educated at the Lincoln Institute at Kentucky. Lincoln Institute was a 444 acre boarding school for African American high school students founded by Berea College. The school followed Booker T. Washington's philosophy of vocational education.

His father Whitney Young, Sr. served as the principal of the school. In this position, Young, Sr. supervised an interracial staff and transformed the Institute by implementing a shadow curriculum that encouraged the study of liberal arts instead of an exclusive focus on domestic and agricultural skills. (Carten, 2021). Young, Sr. was an important role model for his son who demonstrated leadership and mediation skills. His son learned pragmatism and creative problem solving from his father. (Dickerson, 1998). Young Jr. graduated in 1937 as the valedictorian of his class at the age of 15. He then entered Kentucky State, a historically Black college and majored in science and education. At Kentucky State, he met Margaret Buckner whom he later married.

### **3. Change of Focus**

After graduating from Kentucky State, Young became a teacher and coach at an African American high school. He was drafted into the United States Army and entered an electrical engineering program.

Young originally planned to attend medical school and become a physician. His military experiences mediating disputes between African American soldiers and white officers changed his career focus to social work. He entered the School of Social Work at the University of Minnesota. While studying for his Masters of Social Work (MSW), he interned at the local Urban League office. Upon graduation, Young was hired as the Industrial Relations Secretary for the Urban League chapter of St. Paul, Minnesota.

In this role, Young successfully secured employment opportunities for African Americans and attracted the attention of National Urban League Director Lester Granger. Young was promoted to executive secretary of the Omaha, Nebraska chapter ([cau.edu/school-of-social-work](http://cau.edu/school-of-social-work)). During this time, Young taught social work courses at The University of Nebraska and Creighton University. After a few years, he left to become the Dean of the School of Social Work at Atlanta University (Weiss, 1989).

### **4. Dean of Social Work-Atlanta University**

In 1954, Whitney Young became the Dean of the region's only accredited social work graduate school for African Americans. As dean, Young demonstrated a belief in shared governance, increased the number of faculty, raised salaries, promoted professional development, and attracted funds for student scholarships, and cultivated field agency internships. Under his leadership, student enrollment expanded and the program offered continuing education for community social workers who did not possess the MSW degree (Carten, 2021). During his time in Atlanta, he became president of the Georgia NAACP, and a member of the Greater Atlanta Council for Human Rights. He also advised Atlanta University students involved in civil rights protests ([cau.edu/school-of-social-work](http://cau.edu/school-of-social-work)).

### **5. Urban League Director/NASW President**

As Executive Director, Whitney Young had an immediate impact. He served in the position from 1961 to 1971. He transformed the League into a major civil rights organization. Under his leadership, the organization grew from 60 to 98 chapters. The budget increased from \$325,000 to \$6 million ([www.nps.gov/people/whitney-young-jr.htm](http://www.nps.gov/people/whitney-young-jr.htm)). The Urban League had a reputation for conservatism under former director Lester Granger and did not identify with grass roots activism. Young worked with student protestors and advised sit-in movements. He promoted the Urban League as a professional social work agency with formally trained staff that carried out programs based on research. He affiliated the League with the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights and helped organize the 1963 March on Washington.

He was considered among the Big Six leaders of the civil rights movement along with Martin Luther King, James Farmer, John Lewis, Roy Wilkins, and A. Philip Randolph. He was an advisor to Pres. Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon. He proposed a Domestic Marshall Plan which called for the allocation of \$145 billion over 10 years to bring the poor into the mainstream of American society (Dickerson, 1998). His ideas influenced the development of the War on Poverty. He served on presidential commissions and recommended federal cabinet appointments.

After the rise of the Black Power movement and urban riots, Young initiated the Urban League Street Academy to prepare high school drop outs for college. He also promoted the New Thrust program to improve life in inner city ghettos across the nation. In 1969, Young was awarded the Medal of Freedom by President Johnson. He also authored two books, *To Be Equal* and *Beyond Racism*. In 1969, Young became the president of the National Association of Social Workers.

In this position, he stated that the profession of social work was uniquely equipped to play a major role in social change and that social workers had a professional responsibility to become activists for justice (Carten, 2021).

## 6. Leadership Style

Whitney Young was considered the inside man of the civil rights movement. While Martin Luther King marched in the streets and Thurgood Marshall fought in the courts, Young advocated in corporate boardrooms ([www.powerbrokerfilm.com](http://www.powerbrokerfilm.com)). He was viewed as too conservative and conciliatory by many of his colleagues in the movement. He was essentially considered an Uncle Tom. Young was suave, well-dressed and did not project the appearance of an activist. People often underestimated and disregarded his courage and commitment. However, Whitney Young left a legacy of persuasion, negotiation, and coalition building. He had the ability to tell the truth with humor without offending people (Weiss, 1989).

He interpreted the goals and grievances of the civil rights to the federal government, corporate America, and foundations. He attempted to bridge the divide between African Americans and the power elite while blending interracial mediation with direct protest (Dickerson, 1998). Young died suddenly while attending a conference on African development in Lagos, Nigeria in March 1971. His career can best be summed up in his own words. "I am not anxious to be the loudest or most popular leader. At a critical time, I tried to be an effective voice for the voiceless and hope for the hopeless" (Carten, 2021). Whitney Young is a forgotten, unsung hero of social change in our nation.

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