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# Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism & Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations

## Benjamin T. Jealous

by Kate Leifheit

### ACTIVIST

*Jealous spent most of his life campaigning for social justice and civil rights. At age thirty-five, he became the youngest-ever president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). A Rhodes scholar, he also led the National Newspaper Publishers Association, a trade group for African American publications.*

**AREAS OF ACHIEVEMENT:** Civil rights; Journalism and publishing; Philanthropy; Social issues

### Table of Contents

- Early Life
- Life's Work
- Significance
- Further Reading

#### See Also

Benjamin Chavis  
 Myrlie Evers-Williams  
 Benjamin Hooks  
 Kweisi Mfume  
 Robert Franklin Williams

### Early Life

Benjamin Todd Jealous was born in Pacific Grove, California, on January 18, 1973. He grew up on California's Monterey Peninsula and attended York High School in Monterey. His mother, Ann, worked as a marriage and family therapist, and his father, Fred, led counseling workshops. Jealous grew up in a family that had been members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) for five generations. His family influenced his passion for social justice, public service, and human rights activism.

Jealous attended Columbia University and received his bachelor's degree in political science. While in college, he led protests on behalf of the homeless. He also led a successful campaign that saved financial aid and need-blind admissions programs at Columbia that were in danger of being cut. After being suspended from college because of his role in a protest, he worked as a field organizer in a campaign to prevent the state of Mississippi from converting one of its three historically black universities into a prison.

After the campaign, Jealous stayed in Mississippi to work as a reporter at *The Jackson Advocate*, the oldest African American newspaper in the state. His articles helped expose corrupt officials at the state's Parchman prison. Jealous also worked as an organizer for the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund. In September, 1993, Jealous met Lia Epperson, who was set to take over his position in the Legal Defense and Education Fund. The two eventually married and had a daughter.

Jealous returned to Columbia University and graduated in 1997. His mentors encouraged him to apply to Oxford University and he was accepted as a Rhodes scholar. There, Jealous finished a master's program in comparative and social research. After earning his master's degree, he worked as the executive director of the National Newspapers Publishers Association (NNPA), a federation of more than two hundred African American community newspapers, and started an online initiative that doubled the number of black newspapers published online.

### Life's Work

Jealous served as president of the Rosenberg Foundation, a private nonprofit institution that funds civil and human rights advocacy, from 2005 to 2008. He also was director of Amnesty International's United States Human Rights Program.

In 2008, Jealous was named the seventeenth president and chief executive officer of the NAACP. At age thirty-five, he was the youngest person ever to hold this position. He vowed to carry forward the organization's mission of equality, noting that even with an African American president in the White House, there remained significant room for improvement. Jealous focused the organization's attention on incarceration rates among African Americans and predatory lending practices. He also urged members to embrace technology and new media and took steps to modernize the NAACP's outreach and image. His blog for the online publication *The Huffington Post* addressed social and government issues.

Besides his work with the NAACP, Jealous was involved with the Association of Black Foundation Executives, which focuses on promoting effective and responsive philanthropy in black communities. He served on the board of the California Council for the Humanities as well.

### Significance

Jealous represents a generation of activists who came of age in the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's and the Black Power movement of the 1970's. While more opportunities were open to them, these young activists often dealt with racism in forms different

from those their predecessors had faced. Jealous enjoyed a privileged upbringing and excelled in higher education while devoting himself to activism on behalf of those less fortunate. His ascension to leadership roles in major African American organizations at a young age reflects not only his dedication and achievements but also the need for groups such as the NAACP to mobilize a new generation of activists to confront the intertwined issues of race and class in twenty-first century America.

## Further Reading

- 1 Coates, Ta-Nehisi. "The Trials of Benjamin Jealous." *The Nation* 289, no. 3 (July 20, 2009): 16. Detailed profile covering Jealous's family history, activism throughout his school years, and the circumstances surrounding his election as president of the NAACP.
- 2 Jealous, Benjamin T. "Barack Obama and the Future of the Civil Rights Movement." Interview by Justin Ewers. *U.S. News and World Report* 145, no. 7 (September 29, 2008): 16-17. Jealous discusses Obama's presidential candidacy and his strategies and plans as president of the NAACP.
- 3 \_\_\_\_\_. "Race Matters." Interview by Deborah Solomon. *The New York Times*, August 2, 2009. Jealous discusses the arrest of scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., which sparked a controversy over racial profiling, and other race-related contemporary issues.

## Citation Types

Type	Format
MLA Style	Leifheit, Kate. "Benjamin T. Jealous." <i>Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism &amp; Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations</i> , edited by Editors of Salem Press, Salem, 2017. <i>Salem Online</i> .
APA Style	Leifheit, Kate. (2017). Benjamin T. Jealous. In E. Salem Press (Ed.), <i>Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism &amp; Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations</i> . Hackensack: Salem. Retrieved from <a href="https://online.salempress.com">https://online.salempress.com</a>
CHICAGO Style	Leifheit, Kate. "Benjamin T. Jealous." <i>Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism &amp; Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations</i> . Hackensack: Salem, 2017. Accessed January 10, 2019. <a href="https://online.salempress.com">https://online.salempress.com</a> .