

Williams: Richmond NAACP salutes heroes sung and unsung

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The keynote speaker at Saturday's Richmond NAACP gala has led a protest campaign in North Carolina that draws from the moral authority of the civil rights movement during its mid-20th-century heyday.

One of the honorees at the event will be an unsung civil rights activist who was at the scene when Virginia Union University protesters engaged in sit-ins to desegregate a Richmond department store and when Prince Edward County shut down its public schools rather than integrate them.

The Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II, president of the North Carolina State Conference NAACP, and Richmond's Edward Peeples, an octogenarian activist, will be among those featured at the Freedom Fund Awards Gala 2015.

Barber, of Goldsboro, N.C., is a member of the national NAACP board and the convener and architect of the Forward Together Moral Movement, a progressive alliance that in 2013 began the Moral Monday rallies against cuts to Medicaid, public education and unemployment benefits by the North Carolina legislature.

"The actual title of my sermon is, 'This Is No Time for Foolishness,'" Barber said during a phone interview Thursday. And yes, he said "sermon" instead of "speech."

Barber, in his speech, says he will attack complacency and materialism, with Mark 8:36 as his launching pad. *For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?*

He will shine a light on the hypocritical version of morality that advocates school prayer and attacks gay rights as the masses suffer from poverty, race and class discrimination, and a lack of health care. Criminal justice reform, public education, immigration rights and a living wage are moral issues, he argues. He will also address the refusal of states such as Virginia and North Carolina to expand Medicaid under Obamacare, "and how many people are dying because of government decisions, and not the will of God."



Rev. William Barber and Dr. Edward H. Peeples

Rev. William Barber (l) and Dr. Edward H. Peeples.

Elected officials use racially coded language to get people to vote against their interests, he said, noting that the closing of Pungo Hospital in Belhaven, N.C., has plunged that rural community into a health care crisis. Of the approximately 500,000 denied Medicaid expansion in North Carolina, about 346,000 are white, he said.

“I’m going to lay out your numbers in Virginia and why there should be a prevailing outcry about what’s going on,” said Barber, who arrives less than a week after an election in which Republicans held their 21-19 edge in the Senate. Given the GOP’s 2-1 majority in the House of Delegates, the prospects appear bleak for Gov. Terry McAuliffe to expand Medicaid in Virginia to the estimated 400,000 residents who need it.

“We have less voting rights today because the Voting Rights Act has been neutered than we did on Aug. 6, 1965,” the day President Lyndon Johnson signed it into law, Barber said, adding that we must be committed to the task of making our democracy work. “We’re in the embryonic stages of the third Reconstruction,” with extremists attacking public education and teachers, denying women’s rights, suppressing voting rights and denying LGBT rights, he added.

Lynetta Thompson, president of the Richmond Branch NAACP, says the honorees “all line up with the mission and goals of the NAACP,” whether they are assisting low-income residents, promoting social justice or, as in the case of 11-year-old Elijah Coles-Brown, raising awareness of bullying as a motivational speaker.

Peebles, associate professor emeritus of preventive medicine and community health at Virginia Commonwealth University, is among 10 people being honored at the awards event. He is being recognized as a Civil Rights Unsung Hero by the organization.

Peebles, 80, is the author of the book “Scalawag: A White Southerner’s Journey through Segregation to Human Rights Activism.” He wrote it in collaboration with Nancy MacLean, a professor of history and public policy at Duke University, who has closely followed the Moral Monday movement.

He recalled his involvement in the sit-ins to desegregate Richmond’s Thalhimers department store and his work in Prince Edward, which closed its schools from 1959 to 1964 rather than integrate them. His 1963 master’s thesis on the situation in Prince Edward was the first systematic look at the closings.

“I was so rebuked and considered an outlaw by most white people,” he recalled. “If it hadn’t been for the good folks in the NAACP, I wouldn’t have had any friends at all.”

He said he acted as “kind of a spy,” reporting the doings in the white community in Prince Edward to Richmond civil rights lawyers such as Oliver Hill — not that they weren’t tapped in to what was going on.

“Occasionally, I’d come up with stuff they didn’t know about, and they thought it was helpful. So it’s

an important part of my time in those days. And it provided comfort in a way, because I formed new friendships,” he said.

“I came out of a white world and settled in where I was one of their great supporters. So you can just imagine how important (the award) is. It’s like being right at home at a reunion, except all the generations are brand new. They don’t know I’m in the family,” he said, chuckling.

We could use some Moral Monday-style activism in Virginia to reclaim the moral high ground, so that our state’s most vulnerable residents have equal rights, equal protection under the law and equal access to health care. It’s time for more heroes, sung and unsung, to fight for social justice. This is no time for foolishness.