

REVEREND DR. AL SHARPTON

Rev. Al Sharpton is an internationally renowned civil rights leader, founder and President of the National Action Network (NAN) and best-selling author. For decades, he has dedicated his life to the fight for justice and equality, turning the power of dissent and protest into tangible legislation impacting the lives of many in underserved communities.

Former President Barack Obama has called Rev. Sharpton a “voice for the voiceless” and a “champion for the downtrodden,” terms which Rev. Al Sharpton continues to live up to, having nimbly built a grassroots social justice coalition to faithfully represent Blacks in America and to tenaciously promote a modern civil rights agenda. In fact, during President Obama’s presidency, in a profile of Rev. Sharpton on CBS’s 60 Minutes, Rev. Al Sharpton was called President Obama’s go to Black leader.” Today, Rev. Sharpton continues to be on the front line of civil rights and social justice cases as he serves as a “voice for the voiceless.”

In 2020, a whirlwind of global events, amid a high-stakes presidential election, brought to the forefront the acute racial and economic divide facing America. Rev. Sharpton’s ability to speak for the voiceless and garner undivided attention to the inequities exacerbated by a worldwide pandemic, an ensuing economic recession, and a raft of harrowing cases of police brutality, compelled him to activate more community leaders and young people to help lead the charge for change.

NAN’s efforts to galvanize people around police reform has led to sweeping bills passed against chokeholds federally and many reforms within each state. Rev. Sharpton was recently applauded for leading the fight for police accountability by New York Governor Andrew Cuomo as he signed an executive order around police reform –the first of its type in the country. Rev. Sharpton’s words at the funeral of George Floyd have become a clarion call for 2020 and “Get Your Knees Off Our Necks” is known worldwide and Rev. Sharpton is credited for describing the undeniable feeling Black Americans are feeling in the wake of a racial pandemic.

According to an article in The Atlantic (January 14, 2019) “Rev. Sharpton occupies a distinct space. Other than Barack Obama, there is no better-known black leader in the country, nor one with bigger reach. Rev. Sharpton’s National Action Network, with 100,000 members, 111 chapters and 7 regional offices across the United States, supports and amplifies the voices of Black communities. During COVID-19 and the 2020 economic crisis, which disproportionately affected communities of color, NAN served more than half a million meals to low income families and frontline workers across five cities in the U.S. With the help of other grass roots organizations and nonprofits, NAN also helped to connect seniors and immunocompromised citizens with free and discounted rides to grocery stores, pharmacies, doctor appointments and food pantries.

As host of MSNBC’s “Politics Nation that airs each Saturday and Sunday from 5-6 p.m. EST,” and a radio host of “Keepin’ it Real,” a three-hour nationally syndicated daily

radio show, and a national Sunday radio show titled “The Hour of Power,” Rev Sharpton also leads a Saturday action rally from NAN’s Harlem headquarters which is broadcast live on Impact Television and WLIB Radio.

Rev. Sharpton has taken the teachings of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and continues to apply King’s prescient philosophy to fight for one standard of justice, decency and equal opportunities for all people regardless of race, religion, nationality or gender. Rev. Sharpton has been a tireless advocate for everything from police reform and accountability to women and minority-owned businesses, protection of voting rights and education equality.

During the economic downturn of 2020 and the rampant inconsistencies of the federal government’s Paycheck Protection Program to help minority businesses compete for loans, NAN helped to bring together Magic Johnson’s EquiTrust and MBE Capital Partners to offer Paycheck Protection Program loans. As a result, \$100 million in capital was given to smaller minority companies with limited financing options in underserved and rural markets.

Rev. Sharpton and NAN stand alongside families in their difficult quests for justice and police accountability. It was Rev. Sharpton and NAN that raised national awareness around the murder of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery in 2020, which catapulted a renewed urgency for the movement for Black lives and global protests condemning police violence and misconduct. Rev. Sharpton delivered the eulogy at George Floyd’s funerals in Minneapolis and Houston, Texas. Before the spate of cases in 2020, the Reverend and NAN brought national exposure to the tragic death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in 2012 and NAN fought for justice in the cases of Eric Garner and Michael Brown, indelible American tragedies which spearheaded the Black Lives Matter movement.

When 18-year-old Michael Brown was fatally shot by a white police officer in Ferguson, Mo., Rev. Sharpton organized a peaceful rally, delivered the eulogy at the teen’s funeral, and reaffirmed his continuous call for police reform while urging calm during the tense climate.

In the Garner case, Rev. Sharpton and other civil rights groups put pressure on Governor Cuomo, which eventually led to the appointment of a special prosecutor in New York City to investigate police killings of unarmed civilians. It set a precedent and standard for the rest of the nation to emulate.

In 2015, when a gunman murdered nine African Americans during Bible study at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, S.C., Rev. Sharpton traveled to Charleston immediately to speak at some of the victim’s funerals. In Florida, he delivered the eulogy for 31-year-old Corey Jones, who was shot and killed by an off-duty officer as he waited for assistance on Interstate 95 after his vehicle broke down. And it was Rev. Sharpton who spearheaded the call for a special prosecutor after 17-year-old Laquan McDonald was shot 16 times in Chicago.

It was Rev. Sharpton and NAN that raised national awareness around draconian new voter laws in many states and modern mechanisms of voter disenfranchisement. In both 2008 and 2012, the African American vote was pivotal in getting Barack Obama elected, and Rev. Sharpton was instrumental in encouraging voter registration and engagement. He was a fierce advocate for health care reform and implementation of the Affordable Care Act, as well as criminal justice reform, some of which was adopted by former U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder.

“Change doesn’t happen overnight, but it happens as long as we don’t purposely give our power away,” stated President Obama at NAN’s 16th annual convention. “Every obstacle put in our path should remind us of the power we hold in our hands each time we pull that lever or fill in that oval or touch that screen. We just have to harness that power. We’ve got to create a national network committed to taking action. We can call it the National Action Network.”

Rev. Sharpton and National Action Network have been on the frontlines of advocacy for people of color, immigrants, the LGBT community, women, the poor and all disenfranchised people. 2020 marks NAN’s 29th anniversary of social justice work, activism and fighting for equality.

Born on October 3, 1954 in Brooklyn, N.Y., Rev. Sharpton began his ministry at the tender age of four, preaching his first sermon at Washington Temple Church of God & Christ. Just five years later, the Washington Temple Church’s legendary Bishop F.D. Washington licensed his protégé, Rev. Sharpton, to be a Pentecostal Minister.

Rev. Sharpton’s civil rights career began almost as early as his ministry. At 13, Rev. Jesse Jackson and Rev. William Jones appointed him Youth Director of New York’s SCLC Operation Breadbasket, an organization founded by Dr. King in 1971. Rev. Jackson says Rev. Sharpton was a boy prodigy who had a mind like a sponge—absorbing everything.

At the age of 16, Rev. Sharpton founded the National Youth Movement, Inc., which organized young people around the country to push for increased voter registration, cultural awareness and job training programs. It was at that time that he forged a friendship with Teddy Brown, the son of the “Godfather of Soul” James Brown. Tragically, Teddy was killed in a car accident and in the months that followed his passing, James Brown took Rev. Sharpton in as though he was his own and they developed an inexplicable bond. Rev. Sharpton was shaped by his surrogate father Mr. Brown who taught him, “You can’t set your sights on nothing little; you got to go for the whole hog.” Young Sharpton went on the road later with James Brown, and for several years, he also served as the Director of the Ministers Division for the Rainbow Push Coalition under Rev. Jackson.

Long before combatting police brutality became a mainstream issue, Rev. Sharpton was on the front lines marching and leading the call for justice – even risking his own life while doing so. In the 1980s, following the death of 23-year-old Michael Griffith, who was chased by a white mob onto a highway in Howard Beach, Queens and hit by a car, Rev. Sharpton led massive rallies through that very neighborhood even as angry onlookers hurled racial slurs at him and the protesters. The City appointed a special prosecutor and eventually the nine attackers were convicted.

At the age of 37, Rev. Sharpton founded NAN to promote a modern civil rights agenda. That same year in 1991, Rev. Sharpton was preparing to march in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn in another demonstration following the horrific death of 16-year-old Yusef Hawkins, who was shot and killed by a White mob, when a man stabbed Rev. Sharpton in the chest with a knife. He survived the attempt on his life, forgave the assailant, asked a judge for leniency for the man's sentence and even visited this individual in jail. Despite the traumatizing experience, Rev. Sharpton pressed on and continued his life's mission of fighting for justice and civil rights for all.

Whether it was bringing about reform to the NJ State Police following the shooting of three young Black and Latino men on their way to a basketball game, or voicing concern over the arrest, rush to judgment, and conviction of the Central Park Five, Rev. Sharpton has always put a spotlight on societal ills even if he was standing alone while doing so. Other cases that he has been at the forefront of include Abner Louima, Amadou Diallo, Patrick Dorismond, the Jena Six, Sean Bell, Omar Edwards, Ramarley Graham, Kendrick Johnson, Breonna Taylor, Terrance Crutcher, Botham Jean, and many more.

Through NAN, Rev. Sharpton has organized campaigns on ending gun violence, pushing for worker's rights, eliminating unjust policies like stop-and-frisk, fighting for more women and minority owned businesses, a minimum wage increase, education reform – he even embarked on a national education tour with former Republican Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich at the request of President Obama – arguing for the protection of voting rights, immigrant rights, pay equity for women, gay and lesbian rights and a plethora of other causes.

Today, though the challenges at hand may have changed, the need for activism and the need for a champion of equality are just as necessary as they were in the past. Rev. Jackson recently remarked that Rev. Sharpton didn't burn out, but rather, he kept remaking himself, all the while working as diligently as ever – often up to 16 hours a day. In a Vanity Fair piece on Rev. Sharpton, Jackson said: “He didn't just happen to be a leader. He really meant to be one, and he has pursued getting enough power through relationships to achieve his purpose.”

Whether it was his noteworthy Presidential run as a candidate for the Democratic Party in 2004, his contribution to end U.S. Navy exercises in Vieques, Puerto Rico, or his ability

to hold people like radio host Don Imus accountable, Rev. Sharpton has continually used his ingrained talents to fight for what is right. His stance on behalf of the disenfranchised has taken him, in his own words, “from the streets to the suites”.

It is because of that unique ability to maneuver in various circles that Rev. Sharpton understands the dynamics of what it takes to be a true leader who never forgets where he or she came from. He has received praise and acknowledgment from all ends of the political spectrum for his work throughout the decades. Even former President George W. Bush has stated, “Al cares just as much as I care about making sure every child learns to read, write, add and subtract.”

Rev. Sharpton regularly preaches about the importance of political participation. With everything from Supreme Court nominees to issues like voting rights, criminal justice reform, abortion rights and much more on the line, he continues to remind people of the significance of civic engagement because at the end of the day, all decisions directly impact the citizenry. As Rev. Sharpton has tirelessly shown the world with his life’s work, we must be the change we wish to see.

In March 2016, Rev. Sharpton was honored with the “Mandela Legacy Hope, Success & Empowerment Award” in recognition of his long history of achievements in advancing civil rights causes around the world. Connecting the dots between domestic challenges in a global context, Rev. Sharpton often addresses international audiences and issues impacting people around the globe. In 2015, he delivered a resounding speech on civil rights, race relations and more at the prestigious Oxford Union in England. At the end of his speech, he received a 10-minute standing ovation.

Rev. Sharpton was educated in New York public schools and attended Brooklyn College. He has an Honorary Doctorate of Divinity from Bethune-Cookman University, Virginia Union University and an honorary degree from A.P. Bible College. He resides in New York City and has two daughters, Dominique and Ashley, who are both active in NAN and with his radio and television shows.

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