

A Meeting with the Mayor of Philadelphia (Mississippi)

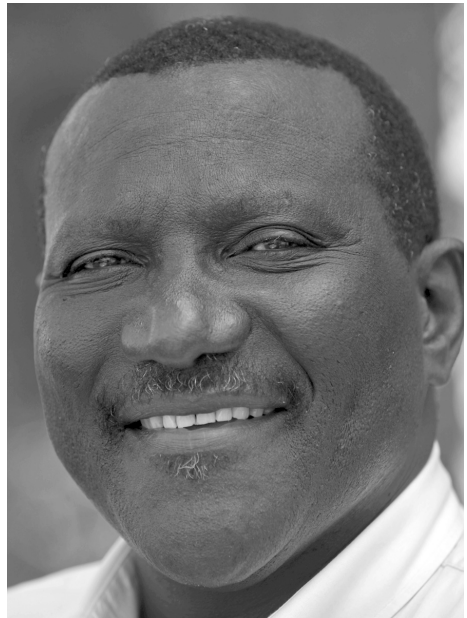
James Young

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Philadelphia is a small city in the eastern part of the southern state of Mississippi, an area popularly known for its lavish Shoptaw Indian reservation and the great casinos that attract thousands of visitors every day. It is also known because of the sad events that took place there during the years prior to the promulgation of civil rights laws.

Discriminatory acts and racial segregation still persist in the memory of Philadelphian African Americans older than fifty years of age. James Young, a robust black man over six feet tall, was born and raised there. He is one of the many Philadelphia residents who vividly remember the racist acts committed by numerous white men in that city. Notwithstanding, despite the fact that the new mayor uses the past referentially, he does not keep his eyes set on the past. Instead, his gaze is fixed on the future. Accordingly, he has set out on a mission whose historical value is similar to Barack Obama's rise to power as President of the United States.

There are more than nine thousand residents in Philadelphia. African Americans, whites, Native Americans, and a few Hispanics live there. They decided to bring about a change and were successful. They elected James Young mayor of a place where no black man had ever risen to a position of so much responsibility. Everyone was responsible for his successful election, the new mayor affirmed, explaining that close to 30% of the white vote was for him in a place where blacks



Mayor James Young

and Native Americans constitute a minority. The rise to power of Mayor Young, who is married and has a child, reveals that the American people have changed their way of thinking. They seem to be more and more open to diversity and tolerance with every day that goes by.

It was moving for me to talk to Young, who agreed to receive us despite his tight agenda and harassment by prominent media sources. His eyes, as dark as his skin, gleamed on more than one occasion, as if on the verge of tears. The road

had been long and not without obstacles. One can at once perceive Youngs' modesty, simplicity, and intelligence. That and his commitment to his new responsibility reveal him to be a wonderful example of drive and will. He was able to overcome the stagnancy and old prejudices that still plague U.S. society. Not unlike Obama, himself, Young is sending a clear message to everyone—blacks and whites—in the United States who remain anchored to a past to which no one can return. Change is happening in the United States, from Washington to Philadelphia, from Alaska to Florida.

Ramón Colás: I appreciate that you found time to interview. I would like to speak about the significance of your election to the city of Philadelphia, MS, and Mississippi in whole. Spanish mass media showcased your election and also said that the vision of the U.S. changed after Barack Obama became the President of the U.S.

Mayor Young: Welcome to Philadelphia, MS. I will go over the issues that you brought up. First of all, I am pleased to be a part of the history, but I want to emphasize that it was a collective effort. This happened because of the history of racism, clan movement, and violence back in 1960s; the election of Barack Obama brought up a lot of bias. Our city is moving forward and our nation is moving forward. I have a lot of people casting their first vote - this sends a message of hope and change. I am the manifestation of this change.

Ramón Colás: How does it feel personally to be a part of this change?

Mayor Young: Words cannot really describe the feelings. In fact, before you came, I called a gentleman from Texas who saw a story on CNN. When we started speaking, the man was crying because of happiness. The older ones not only in MS, but where the racism was prevalent, compare my election to that of Barack Obama's. There was another lady who never thought she would live to see a black man elected President. First thing she saw was the election of Barack Obama as President and the next thing- electing

me in Philadelphia. The words cannot really describe the feelings. I think the praise goes to the people of Philadelphia.

Ramón Colás: The Spanish press published a photo in which you were surrounded by very happy people—not just black but also white Americans.

Mayor Young: It just echoes my support by black and white, American Indians and Asian Americans. I did not look over anybody, nor did I pass anybody. This just shows that it was a collective effort. The most important part was that families came forward and gave me their trust and I will not let them down.

Ramón Colás: You mentioned earlier that there were many young voters. Usually, the youth vote for an idea, not a project, to strengthen the leadership of the future and create a precedent.

Mayor Young: What brought them here was leadership. I spoke about major issues that the young people were concerned about, promising more jobs and securing their future. I stay connected to the people and minorities. If you can stay connected to the people and remember that you are a servant of the people, not some kind of emperor, then you will be doing well. The message I want to send is that I am concerned with issues that occupy the minds of the youth.

Ramón Colás: In our program, we have a song “We shall overcome” and a line that “black and white will rise up together”. This is something you have achieved.

Mayor Young: Somebody asked me once whether racism is over. No, but it is dying. Overcoming – not quite, opening the door – yes. But the song is true: “We Shall.” This is a work in progress, I must maintain my integrity and everybody I represent.

Ramón Colás: Your election indicates the change in mentality.

Mayor Young: I have been asked how I did it and how it happened. A lot of people said they wanted a change and that is why they elected me. It is overwhelming for the nation and the world because it brings so much attention.



James Young celebrating his victory

Ramón Colás: Your election as Mayor and Barack Obama as President brings us closer to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dreams.

Mayor Young: I think so. It shows the kind of vision one possesses. He was an icon of his time and many years later his words still resonate. At that time people were saying, 'Dr. King, you are talking a foolish thing.' However, as you can see, his words have brought a change. We have a long ways to go and a lot of things to do – together. A lot of lives have been lost because a lot of people said things could not be better. It has always been this way – somebody needs to stand forward and make a change. I thank God that I am old enough to see what it was like and now to experience the change. While you are living, you do not know that you are going to be a part of change and actually make the history.

Ramón Colás: Barack Obama in one of his speeches broadcast on TV asked the nation to go forward to attain challenging goals. Please comment on it.

Mayor Young: We cannot sit and wait for a handout. We have to go and get it ourselves. This election is about a dream and a goal and if we were satisfied with the way it was then, we would not be speaking today. We know that our history was not fair, but I refuse to blame anybody for our failures. That speech aimed at moving us forward and this is what we need to do.

Ramón Colás: In Germany, the youth cannot comprehend the history of the 20th century and they are asking how it was possible that the Second World War happened. There is a study going on at a Texan university that something similar is going on in the U.S. among the youth.

Do you think that they feel ashamed of what their ancestors did in the U.S. in general and in Mississippi, in particular?

Mayor Young: I think that everybody should be ashamed and feel distaste for what has been going on. However, if I just condone what my father did, it will not change anything unless I feel and act differently. Regarding how these things happened, I think that people mentally are asleep. Terrorists use propaganda and fear to move forward. If the younger generation says that we do not want to participate in racial discrimination anymore, then a real change is possible.

Ramón Colás: What percent of the white population in Mississippi voted for you?

Mayor Young: Thirty per cent of the whites. The total of 55% of voters cast their votes for me, including 42% of blacks and about 2% of American Indians. These days, we have a lot of black officials in Mississippi, which highlights the change in our state.

Ramón Colás: Like President Obama, you have been under a great pressure, and a lot is expected from your future actions.

Mayor Young: We understand that the expectations are high. My main purpose as Mayor is to do what is right and treat people fairly – this way I do not take it as pressure, but a fair moral obligation. Some of my actions will be amplified or twisted, but as long as I stand on a fair ground, it does not concern me. My motto is 'Be careful, be mindful and I walk slowly and fairly' because I feel that everything I do is being amplified.

Ramón Colás: I share the same feelings as you. I have been studying racial relations in the world and in Cuba, in particular. Your election was moving for me because this is what I wish to happen in my country – an election of more black officials. Today, some 63% of Afro Cubans live in Cuba, but only a handful is in the government. Do you know about the situation of Afro-Cubans in Cuba?

Mayor Young: Not in detail, I heard only

scattered pieces of the news. I am not used to this attention. I am honored by your interview and feel humbled by your words.

Ramón Colás: I appreciate your comments. You already participated in one of the programs. I wish you could speak Spanish so you can reach a greater audience directly.

Mayor Young: What we can do is build relationships, so that somebody can stand to interpret, to bridge the gap. Due to the fact that I do not speak the Spanish language, we need to make sure that we understand each other and speak about the same topic. The same thing happened in Philadelphia's election and the election of Barack Obama. Both elections are sending the message that we are getting connected – slowly but surely.

Ramón Colás: The election of Barack Obama as President made a great impact on Cuba and created great expectations of change. That is why I want to highlight that this change is going on not only at the highest level, but at all levels of administration.

Mayor Young: That is true. The change is taking place everywhere. I want to start working on simple things that made people complain about for the last several years and then work up to the more complicated issues.

Ramón Colás: You are making history and, as you know, history includes daily actions as well. You are not only representing the black, but also the white and American Indians. What is the most important lesson about your election for the US people?

Mayor Young: Exactly, we are all called Americans. In the context of the Constitution, we should be treated and represented equally. If I accomplish it, I will do my job properly.

Ramón Colás: In Latin America, there are about 150,000,000 individuals of African descent. They have always been fascinated by the United States and the election of Barack Obama, because it is a dream of theirs' come true. Do you

think that these changes will have an impact on Latin America as well?

Mayor Young: Yes, I do think so. I refuse to stay the same because I do not like the status quo and I strive on challenges. I believe it will be totally inspiring to come and move forward. Give and demand more – that is a part of being who you are.

Ramón Colás: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr had a dream then. What is your dream now?

Mayor Young: I guess it is very simple – I want to be the best mayor the city of Philadelphia has ever had. I also want to be fair to the people. My dream is to promise and back it up. To be fair, make promises, and then back them up – not a relationship-building situation to show off

We call Philadelphia the city on the hill. Before, we had a dim light, because of the evil other people have done, but now I want to say, 'Welcome home!' Being a successful man is important, but being a successful mayor is now more important for me.

Ramón Colás: In Cuba there are political prisoners because of their political beliefs. We hope that there will be significant changes toward democracy in Cuba in the near future. What is your message to Cuban people?

Mayor Young: Continue to be diligent about fulfilling your rights for freedom. Change will come, but sometimes we want it sooner. Set your mind and heart for what you think is right. Be patient under pressure about what you want: It takes a while. Think about how long it took for us to get here: Be patient, work hard, do not stop.

Ramón Colás: I believe you can travel to Cuba with me. I have a dream to return to Cuba and do something similar to what you have done.

Mayor Young: I am looking forward to that.

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