

# We Are One: Struggle Rooted in a Belief System



By Jitu Brown

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**I had a moment in my young life—in 1991—where I had a choice.** I grew up in Bronzeville, the historic African American community on Chicago's South Side. I was on my way to becoming a successful music artist; I had a record deal in the works with Polygram Records. At the same time, I was also becoming politicized by hip hop, beginning my journey into studying African history.

I was soon introduced to a community organizing group in my neighborhood called KOCO, the [Kenwood Oakland Community Organization](#). Around the time that Polygram approached me to sign a solo record deal, KOCO asked me to see if I'd be interested in volunteering with their youth programs. I eventually became disgruntled with the record deal and lack of support for the socially conscious music I was creating, so I negotiated my release from my contract with Polygram. I then chose to volunteer with KOCO, and it was the best decision I ever made in my life.



## 93 'til Infinity: My Start with Community-Centered Campaigns

With KOCO, I started working in schools, delivering culturally relevant leadership development programs to students during and after the school day. I began to see the inequities and injustices of schooling more clearly. In many of the schools, there was no air conditioning, the windows were dark, and there was one old computer in each class—no computer labs. There were overcrowded classrooms and old books. I began to work with young people, through organizing, to change the conditions in their school for the better.

My first foray into real organizing, however, was in the community. In 1993, several residents and I

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focused on a neighborhood store called One Stop, which had been in our community since the 1940s. It had bad conditions: dirty facilities, expired food, and elevated prices. With others, I formed a coalition called the Community Action Network. We came in there with a video camera and recorded what we saw. We then brought the store management to the table. They cleaned their act up, and we even got them to increase the pay for people working in the community.

With my first organizing victory under my belt, I returned to doing close work with schools, this time in a program called the Umoja Leadership Institute. A lot of my “how-to” knowledge around education had come from working with African-centered schools called *shules*, particularly one school in Chicago called the *Shule Ya Watoto*, which means “school for children” in Kiswahili. I also became one of the mentors in a rights of passage program for young men called the *Weusi Mtu Jamaa*—“Family of Black Men.” My instructors and mentors were men and women from the Black Power movement, and I brought their spirit into my work with Chicago Public Schools, known here as CPS.

### Beating Back School Closures in Bronzeville

I would soon find myself focused on organizing again, this time as a response to our city’s plan to tear down many of the housing projects in our neighborhood of Bronzeville. As city leaders started closing down housing projects, they started closing schools too. In 2004, they announced the closing of 20 out of the 22 schools in our neighborhood, and they even gave it a name: the Mid-South Plan. The rhetoric behind the “plan” was that the schools were failing and that closing schools was what was right

for kids. It was the first wave of Mayor Daley’s larger “Renaissance 2010” plan, which was to close a hundred schools and create 60 charter schools, euphemized as “CPS Performance Schools.”

Bronzeville is only a ten-minute drive from downtown Chicago, and unbeknownst to us at the time, it was always a place that white Chicago wanted back. But Black Chicago had built

Bronzeville. The list of Black trailblazers from our neighborhood is legend: author Richard Wright, activist Ida B. Wells, singers Nat King Cole and Minnie Riperton, first Black mayor of Chicago Eddie Harris—the list goes on. This wave of school closures we didn’t ask for meant that this community—*our* community—was under siege.



Because we had the Umoja program in all these different schools and had built deep relationships with students and their families, we were able to organize a base of parents to beat the city’s Mid-South Plan for school closures. I began to identify and pull in strong parents who wanted to do more. These parents eventually became the little grassroots army that we used to chase Arne Duncan (who was then the CEO of CPS) up and down the street to the point where he stopped messing with schools in our neighborhood. Later, at KOCO’s 2005 convention, we decided to form a permanent education committee called the Mid-South Education Association to organize to improve and transform our schools to serve our community.

I started to become addicted to organizing. After the convention, I held various roles with KOCO, including community schools coordinator, volunteer board president, and lead education

organizer. In 2012, we ended up forming the Journey for Justice Alliance (J4J), made up of community organizing groups across the country. J4J came out of parents like us from other cities being frustrated about school closings in Black communities. Although we banded together to strengthen our resistance, CPS didn't stop its efforts. It tried to close Dyett High School, the last remaining open access school in Bronzeville. It didn't succeed, though: leaning on our parent-centered resistance, I helped lead a 34-day hunger strike that eventually saved the school.

### Breaking the Single-Issue Mold: Equity or Else

J4J developed a powerful education justice agenda, opposing mass school closings in Black and Brown communities, dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline, and advocating for sustainable community schools. We eventually called for the creation of over 25,000 schools across the country rooted in, and accountable to, Black and Brown communities.

But we also understood that fighting for educational justice had to be connected to fighting for equity and justice across the range of issues affecting the quality of our lives. Waging a multi-issue quality-of-life struggle is not new: Marcus Garvey did it, and the 1963 March on Washington was a quality-of-life march. Unfortunately, we had been anesthetized to work by the single-issue nature of philanthropy.

A few years ago, J4J began to break this single-issue mold with a quality-of-life campaign called [Equity or Else](#). The COVID-19 pandemic had pushed us toward providing mutual aid to our communities that extended beyond the education space. Then the murder of George Floyd happened, and we began to say, "This is our moment. This is not just about education." We started reaching out to all sorts of organizations, including Clean Water Action, National Alliance Against Racism and Political Repression, Sweetie Pie, Appetite for Change, Good Kids Mad City, and People for Community Recovery. These groups, situated throughout the country, dealt with various issues such as food insecurity and justice, youth investment, and environmental justice.

At J4J, we started having conversations with these organizations, saying, "Look, we're fighting the same wolf, and if you lead us in environmental justice [or food insecurity / youth investment / clean water / ...], we'll follow. Tell us what the platform is." We came up with a methodology of listening projects where we would hold small to medium-sized meetings, which would eventually turn into large town hall meetings.

In the spring of 2022, we gathered in Baltimore to adopt a platform to address the range of quality-of-life issues we had identified, including youth investment, education, housing, healthcare, the rights of our seniors, and immigrant rights. The following September, we formally launched the Equity or Else Campaign at an event with various





elected officials, including Congressman Jamaal Bowman. Our goal was to “put racial justice on the ballot” in 2024. We followed the launch with Equity or Else Week in April of 2023 where we began to localize our quality-of-life agenda in different cities. Right now, we are working with groups in 12 cities across the country, and we are in conversation with people in many others.

With the Democratic National Convention coming up in Chicago in August of 2024 and with a mayor (Brandon Johnson) who is from the Education Justice movement, we have a unique opportunity to engage in change. On the day before the convention starts, we plan to convene a National Racial Equity Summit to bring our quality-of-life agenda onto the national stage.

Recently, after our many years of organizing, CPS just announced it was going to become a sustainable community school district. This represented the momentous achievement of a dream long sought by both KOCO and J4J. In the past, my fellow organizers and I have been dragged out of school board meetings—arrested, even—for our vocal advocacy. But now, I get invited to CPS school board meetings to speak as a subject matter expert. I recently spoke as the co-chair of the board’s Sustainable Community School Expansion Committee—not with a two-minute time limit, not with the police standing around me, but as someone invited to speak on their expertise.

I believe that this victory is a microcosm of what can happen everywhere. We just have to believe that we can do it.

### **We’re at War with a Belief System, Not Issues**

Philanthropy has anesthetized us into organizing solely on the basis of specific issues. That is, if we’re not funded to work on an issue, then we can’t work on it. We’re heavily under-resourced, but we know in our gut that we’re not at war with an issue, but rather a *belief system*.

Beliefs are values that govern your behavior. There is a belief system that says that Black people don't matter, and that Black death is acceptable—and can even be celebrated. This belief system also says that the lives of Brown people and women don't matter. This system infects every quality of life institution that most of white America takes for granted.



For example, the same belief system that says that we should starve public schools in communities like Bronzeville ignores the fact that we've *already* starved them. This belief system then closes these much-needed schools in order to push Black people out of urban landscapes. The evil in that is no different than the evil of creating food deserts. It's no different than the evil of a police officer looking at a nine-year-old Black child as an animal, willing to grab them and slam them on the ground.

This belief system is what we are at war with because we don't have control over how we educate ourselves. In other words, that belief system infects *us*, too. How we see ourselves has been determined by white supremacy. Everything we see, every song we hear on the radio, and every image that we're bombarded with fuels our sense of hopelessness—our sense of not being able to do anything. That's what we're at war against. As Dr. Carter G. Woodson said, "If you control [someone's] thinking, you don't have to worry about their actions." You don't have to make them go through the back door; they will cut one out for their own benefit.

We are cursed with the disease of individualism. While we say things like "it takes a village," we don't believe that in our hearts, because that was African, and that's been beaten out of us. We don't understand that. So my struggle is to understand it, and I work to understand it every day. I don't always succeed, because America is masterful at making Negroes, and they've made one out of me. I've had to struggle to be African, and this means I've also had to unlearn the belief system America forces upon us.

But we have to realize that "they" are not more powerful than us. We are lions, but we have been taught that we're lambs. I'm blessed to have had women and men in my life that taught me that I'm a lion. So our work is to get people in the room and then shake them and say, "You are not who they told you you are. You're the first people ever to look at grass and name it. Shake your head and reawaken your African self, or your indigenous self, or your white working-class self." We can't do this thinking in the ways they trained us to think.

### **We are One: Intersectional Organizing Rooted in African Tradition**

I view myself as an African in America; if I was really "American," then I wouldn't have to be an organizer. I could be a radio DJ or anything else. The fact that we have to fight for what white America takes for granted is proof to me that we are not considered Americans. My identity as a Black man—as an African in America—shapes everything that I look at. In J4J we have a saying: "We want people to have the type of experiences that will make them imagine what the world would be like if it was a J4J world." We always try to provide that type of space for folk to be able to be comfortable and safe in being unapologetically Black, unapologetically Brown, or unapologetically whoever God made you.

To me, *intersectional* organizing is rooted in African tradition. I understand culture as a people's way of life. There has to be a way that we organize

that is reflective of that understanding. That understanding is that we are one.

Oneness is not sameness; rather, it is working together in that spirit. When you talk about intersectional organizing, to me, it is moving in that spirit where, if we're all making this painting of a beautiful world, and we know what the vision is, we can all have a section of the painting that we're responsible for. But we know we're working together, so there are times that we say, "Do you have a blue? Do you have a red? I need a green..."

Back when Arabs and Europeans attacked Africa, they didn't conquer Africa immediately. They had a formula: merchants, missionaries, and military. Their goal was to make us want that shiny thing. All they had to do was find one *weak king*, because if there's a thousand of us in the room and there's somebody outside the door that wants to kill us, it only takes one person to open that door. As they began to get us to want that shiny thing, corrupting individuals within our power structures, they challenged our sense of spirituality by bringing a white-centered Christianity into Africa. If we had never abandoned our sense of oneness, then Africa would've never been conquered, because it wasn't the military that did it—we abandoned our values for the bribes they offered.

Our work of intersectional organizing is not going to happen if we are simply looking at things from a policy perspective. We have to do the policy work, of course. But more important than the policy work is the work of creating the alternative, realigning resources, and building infrastructure. For example, in the middle of the pandemic, KOCO started an initiative called KOCO Serves, a youth-led food production, delivery, and supply initiative. It has a database now of over 3,500 people that young people still lead to this day, working together in the spirit of oneness. That is *movement* work.

## Transforming Realities Toward Self-Determination: Lineages and Lessons

We can't do this work by thinking like our oppressors. Many of my teachers were folks who came from groups like United Slaves and the Republic of New Afrika, so my organizing has always been rooted in traditions of Black-led power building, self-determination, and institution building. People usually think of institutions as brick and mortar; but institutions are the people. So my work is always to help build and develop folk, helping them get the information and the inspiration that they need in order to trust themselves with actually seizing control of their destiny.



In this paradigm, one person might work on healthcare, and another might work on housing, but we must have a common theme that centers us, this right to our self-determination. Put another way, it's our right to shape and control how the institutions function in our community. And that means Black communities lead our own struggles in solidarity work.

White “progressives” are very progressive until it comes to Black self-determination. I've lived it; I've seen it. I've been in a room with many of these people. And when I'm talking, I know that what they're really hearing is *ni\*\*a gibberish* because they're not listening to me. They're not listening to us because what they want is to tolerate us instead of being *guided* by us in racial justice work.

There are also lessons that I've learned through making mistakes with my self-care. For example, I can't work out like I used to. I need to be serious about drinking water, taking time to get quiet, and

meditation. I've learned to take the high ground more often after making the mistake of getting down in the dirt and moving from a place of love with people who wouldn't give love back. This is warrior's work; it's not supposed to be easy. You can do this work if you have a cohort, a group of sisters and brothers that you stand back-to-back with, no matter what.

At the end of the day, there are four things I think an organizer must be. One, you got to be humble; you are no better than the people. Two, we have to become great listeners. Three, we need to validate our people's struggle: titles and jobs are trinkets that give us no qualification in the real struggle for freedom; what gives us qualification is spirit. Fannie Lou Hamer said, "Whether you got a PhD or no D, you matter."

Four, and most importantly, we must be consistent. Too many people come into our community with promises they don't keep. When I was working with youth programs, one of my teachers told me, "Never miss. If you're sick, go." I took that to heart.

We have to be committed to transforming our realities. And we are not going to live to see the fruition of it. But we can live to see the microcosms of what's possible so that we can build the next generation of changemakers. We can give them something more than just problems. One of the things we have to give them is a struggle that is rooted in a belief system, not issues. It is mandatory, or we are derelict in our duties. ❖

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