

Jeff JOHNSON: speaking truth to our youth

Social activist and political commentator Jeff Johnson has emerged as a strong voice of urban consciousness. The 32-year-old is host and producer of *The Cousin Jeff Chronicles*, a quarterly series of public affairs documentaries on BET geared toward young people of color, which debuted in February. Johnson addresses concerns other commentators will not, from the use of the ever-inflammatory N-word to millionaires under the age of 35 “who don’t sing, dance, or carry a ball.”

Dedicated to paying homage to both the civil rights and hip-hop generations, Johnson is adamant about connecting young people with our existing vehicles of social progress to increase the success of mobilization efforts. “We need the wisdom of our elders integrated with the strength of our youth to fight the forces that attack us,” he says. “Young people have fresh ideas, fresh tactics. Historically, anywhere in the world, it has been young people who have served as catalysts in movements for social change.”

He’s definitely on to something. Considering the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Soweto and Tiananmen Square, the commitment of young people to successful civil rights campaigns is not a unique phenomenon. Johnson honed his gift to motivate and mobilize young people of color as national director of the NAACP’s Youth & College Division and as the vice president of Russell Simmons’ Hip-Hop Summit Action Network. He currently serves as the Director of African American Outreach for People for the American Way. He encourages young people to “analyze and challenge information” and to develop a cadre of informed and responsible leaders.

Johnson humbly admits that his is no one-man show. “Yes, I have a platform, but there are activists on the ground all over the country working with young people,” he says. “You may not see them on CNN, but they are changing lives, too.”

His guiding principle: “Truth is power.” And to get to the crux of matters affecting our communities, Cousin Jeff calls upon the likes of Dr. Cornel West and Common while giving credence to brothers and sisters on the streets of urban centers. “As long as we keep lying to ourselves and one another, we shouldn’t expect to even begin to see progress,” Johnson says. —Amber Efé

Check local listings for the next installment of *The Cousin Jeff Chronicles*.