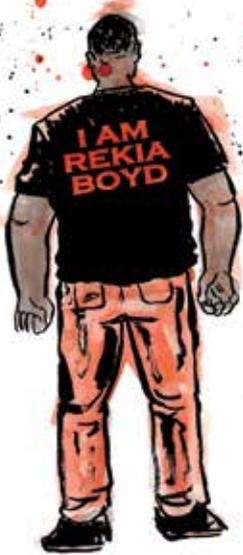




Damon Williams, 23, radio talk show host



Malcolm London, 22, poet and spoken-word performer



Paris Fresh, 23, TV major Columbia College



The New Black Power

They're young. They're radical. They're organized. And they're a thorn in Rahm's side.

By Darryl Holliday • Illustrations by Jamie Hibdon



Rachel Williams, 25, Chicago Public Schools debate team coach



Charlene Cornuthers, 30, full-time activist/organizer



Charles Preston, 25, African American studies major at Chicago State



The night of December 9, 2015, was a particularly tense one at the Chicago Police Department headquarters on Michigan and 35th, just south of the

Loop. That afternoon, hundreds of protesters had marched up the Magnificent Mile, stopping at intersections to disrupt traffic, as they had several times since the November 24 release of the now-infamous Laquan McDonald video. Earlier in the day, Mayor Rahm Emanuel had publicly apologized for the shooting death of the 17-year-old at the hands of a police officer, but that acknowledgment only seemed to fuel the outrage.

Now, as the Chicago Police Board began its monthly public meeting, a standing-room-only crowd filled the first-floor auditorium. The McDonald shooting was top of mind for many on hand. Some in the audience refused to sit quietly, resorting to chants of “Sixteen shots! Stop the cover-up!”

Still, residents had other grievances to air, and as they stood, one by one, to address the board, their comments—limited to two minutes—were often cut off with a familiar refrain: “Thank you, your time is up.”

“Good evening, Ms. Williams,” a board member said as a woman dressed in a black hoodie, with a pair of neon-pink headphones around her neck, approached the microphone.

“Good evening, *unelected board*,” Rachel Williams answered without hesitation. The 25-year-old Chicago Public Schools debate team coach and member of the activist group Black Youth Project 100—members of which had participated in the march earlier that day—then launched into a passionate indictment of police officer Dante Servin that left her literally breathless. In 2012, while off duty, Servin fired into a group of four people in North Lawndale, killing 22-year-old Rekia Boyd. (Servin claimed he mistook a cell phone for a gun.) Though the police superintendent, Garry McCarthy, eventually recommended that he be fired, Servin remained on the force pending a decision by the board.

Her two minutes finished, Williams

returned to her seat. But the young activist wasn’t done. A short while later, she exchanged a nod with other BYP100 members. Then the group’s national director, Charlene Carruthers, stood up. “We are leaving. This meeting is over,” she called out, waving an arm toward the exit.

And with that, something wholly unexpected happened: Most of the 200 people in the audience rose and followed the group out. “Your time is up,” some told the board members while exiting.

It was a remarkable demonstration of power. “We were being preemptive,” Williams would explain later. “We wanted to say the board is illegitimate, that we were tired of the voices of the community not being heard.”

Fed up with a system they say is stacked against them, a new generation of black activists in Chicago are openly disdainful of working through official channels. And nowhere is that sentiment more prevalent than with the BYP100, which is fast emerging in the wake of the McDonald firestorm as the most vocal and arguably most effective activist group in town.

Its marches, which helped draw the national media attention that led to McCarthy’s firing, are designed to be disruptive, whether by stopping traffic or, in the case of its Black Friday protest, Christmas shopping on Michigan Avenue. Its actions are provocative: In January, on Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday, BYP100 members led a symbolic funeral procession to deliver coffins to black aldermen whose decisions they have deemed harmful to black lives. Its approach is exclusionary at times: The group has denied nonblack allies and journalists access to certain gatherings, with the goal of creating a private space for black mourning.

And its attitude toward the established power structure can be contemptuous: When the mayor asked for a sit-down with BYP100 leaders a day before the McDonald video’s release, they flatly refused. “If he’d said, ‘OK, let’s have a public meeting. I’ll hear from the people,’ we would’ve done it,” says Carruthers, 30. “But there are no back-door meetings with the mayor.”

So what is the BYP100? By definition,

its members are black and young (membership is restricted to ages 18 to 35). Many are students, attending schools such as the University of Chicago, Chicago State, and Columbia College; others are artists, poets, service workers, media makers, and musicians. What they have in common is their frustration with life in a city where racial segregation is all but taken for granted, where roughly two-thirds of people killed by police are black and less than 3 percent of officer misconduct complaints result in any punishment, where schools, jobs, and mental health clinics seemingly disappear overnight.

Their agenda is decidedly radical. In the short term, they want an elected group to replace the appointed Chicago Police Board, but in the long term, they advocate the outright abolition of the police department and the prison system. Among their other goals: reparations, universal childcare, a higher minimum wage, the decriminalization of marijuana, and the repeal of other laws that disproportionately land black youths in the criminal justice system.

BYP100’s uncompromising approach can rub people the wrong way, even within the black activist community. After members filed out of the police headquarters the night of the board meeting, they stationed themselves several feet from the front door. A sharply dressed middle-aged black man followed after them, casting a gaze in their direction. “Is this the group that disrespected the meeting and walked out?” he asked rhetorically, to no one and everyone. “It’s not about your agenda. People want to support you, and you walk out on everybody like what they say doesn’t matter.”

Some BYP100 members engaged the man in conversation, though they were clearly unsure whether to approach him as a threat or an ally. Meanwhile, the impromptu rally carried on, now amplified by a handheld loudspeaker.

“We have been out here since May, and every single month the crowd gets bigger. That’s why we are out here in the cold,” Williams told the group, which was gathering in a circle around her.

“We don’t need the police to guarantee us safety, because they never have.”



BYP100'S RACHEL WILLIAMS, OUTSIDE POLICE HEADQUARTERS

Though BYP100 is making its presence felt in the streets, its roots trace back to academia—to a 2004 University of Chicago research project. That effort, called the Black Youth Project, was led by noted black social activist and feminist Cathy Cohen, now 53 and chairwoman of the school’s political science department. The idea was to study the views, social habits, and culture of black millennials, with the intent of improving their lives. To that end, Cohen created an online hub where educators, activists, and black youths could access the research and other resources designed to empower them.

“None of us went into it thinking, We want to create a new organization and it will be the BYP100,” says Cohen. “It was more that we wanted to make sure young black activists who we thought were doing really great work and building capacity to mobilize started to know each other. And maybe, we thought, they would build a network.”

But they needed a spark, so in 2013 Cohen initiated an organizing meeting to draw together black activists from

around the country. She had landed a \$350,000 grant from George Soros’s progressive Open Society Foundations to fund the effort, and she knew just the person to facilitate the gathering.

Two months earlier, a search for young leaders in Chicago had led Cohen to Carruthers, then 27, an activist/organizer hoping to study political science under Cohen. But a meeting between the two women at Hyde Park’s Z&H MarketCafe left each with a sense of a higher calling. “She articulated an analysis that was spot on in terms of the capacity to mobilize young people and, in particular, young black people,” Cohen says of Carruthers. “I was like, Oh my God, she is brilliant. And she’s charismatic in a nontraditional way. She makes you feel like, You know what, we’re going to win—which not everybody can do.”

Cohen asked Carruthers to serve on the planning committee and, eventually, drafted her to run the initial meeting, held one weekend that July in Chicago. One hundred (hence the name) black millennials from across the country had been invited to participate, and by design, they

represented a variety of viewpoints—from moderate to radical. Naturally, they didn’t agree on what priorities and tactics the group should adopt—or whether there should be a group at all. “Some were like, ‘We don’t need another organization,’” Carruthers recalls.

It was the sort of discord Cohen had wanted, the kind that fosters what she calls “thinking on multiple layers.” But what happened the second day wasn’t part of the plan: George Zimmerman was acquitted on all charges in the slaying of Trayvon Martin. The young activists held hands as they watched the TV reports. Some wept.

The tension that had built up found its outlet in that verdict. It was, Carruthers says, “a moment of collective trauma, but also a moment of collective clarity.” That night, half of the participants hit the streets to protest, while the rest stayed behind to write what would become the group’s first public statement. Titled “To the Family of Brother Trayvon Martin and to the Black Community” and read in a video posted on the Black Youth Project’s website, it said, in part: “We know that justice for black life is justice

for humanity. Our hope and community was shaken through a system that is supposed to be built on freedom and justice for all. We are your sons and daughters. We are the marginalized and disenfranchised. We are 100 next-generation leaders. We are the Black Youth Project 100.”

From its early days as a fledgling group meeting in living rooms, BYP100 has gained mass while picking up momentum. Some 60 to 80 members are currently active in Chicago, and Carruthers has helped set up five other chapters: in the Bay Area, Detroit, New Orleans, New York City, and Washington, D.C. Nationally, the group now numbers about 300.

Within its first year and a half, BYP100 launched a handful of social media and protest campaigns, including #DecriminalizeBlack, #Every28Hours (a reference to the group’s claim that a black person in America is killed “by a police officer or person protected by the state” every 28 hours), and “I’m Young, I’m

Black and I Vote” (meant as an indictment of the Democratic Party for failing to fully engage young black voters).

“I think what we’ve been able to do is show what’s possible,” says Carruthers. “BYP100 is absolutely leading a substantial amount of the black-led organizing period, in the city of Chicago. But we can’t talk about the creation and development of BYP100 out of the context of this particular moment.”

She’s referring to the outrage that has been building in black communities across the country, particularly among young people, following the deaths of Martin, McDonald, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, Quintonio LeGrier, Bettie Jones, and others. At the same time that BYP100 was finding its footing, national movements such as Black Lives Matter and I Can’t Breathe were taking shape. Other Chicago-based activist groups, many of which have overlapping memberships with BYP100, were also coming into their own, including Fearless

Leading by the Youth (FLY), We Charge Genocide, Project Nia, #LetUsBreathe Collective, the People’s Response Team, and Assata’s Daughters, which caters to black girls ages 6 to 17 and acts as a de facto feeder program to BYP100.

That outrage—that cyclical sense of struggle, helplessness, and mourning—is what prompted many of BYP100’s members to join. Rachel Williams, who helped lead the walkout at the police board meeting, signed on in November 2014, in the wake of the tragedies that kept dominating the news. She recalls celebrating her 21st birthday the day Trayvon Martin died and the moment, while she was a student at Kentucky State University, when she learned about the killing of Rekia Boyd. “For me it felt like a dagger in the heart,” Williams says of Boyd’s death. “This woman was old enough to be someone I went to school with. I remember feeling like, What the hell is going on? Just not knowing where to place the emotions.”

Her frustrations stemmed from personal experiences as well. One of the first times she spoke before the Chicago Police Board, in June 2015, it was about a letter her mother received from the Independent Police Review Authority, an agency charged with looking into complaints against Chicago police. An officer had hit her mother in the face, but the IPRA deemed the action justified, the letter said, and would not be recommending punishment. Says Williams: “That created another burning passion.”

Charlene Carruthers is reluctant to call herself BYP100’s primary leader, but she has certainly become its face, mainly through her TV appearances and speaking engagements. In public, she is low-key but assertive, and her actions are decisive, such as locking herself to other young black organizers to blockade a Chicago street. But sitting in BYP100’s temporary offices at the U. of C.’s Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture, she seems more at ease. The 5-foot-2 activist (No. 49 on the Power 50 list) grew up in the Back of the Yards neighborhood on the South Side, switched out of a premed

college track, and earned a master’s in social work at Washington University in St. Louis. She sports tortoiseshell glasses and, today, a long-sleeved flannel, and has an endearing gap-toothed smile.

“We are not simply protesters,” Carruthers says, attempting to define her organization. “I do not identify as a protester. I’m an organizer. I engage in intentional campaigns and direct actions toward a specific set of goals. Does that include protest? Absolutely.”

It’s hard to find an activist group more obsessed with the organizational process than the BYP100. To become a member, a recruit has to attend an orientation, two chapter meetings, and one public event. While each of the six chapters is required to meet at least twice a month as a general body, specialized arms, such as the BYP100 Coordinating Council, gather more often. And in the week leading up to a protest, planning committees often get together nightly. “Oh my gosh, we have very long meetings,” Carruthers says, feigning exasperation.

If the BYP100 sounds a lot like the board of directors for a middling nonprofit, it’s because the organization is a determinedly democratic one. Leaders are nominated, elected, and constantly rotated; the bulk of decisions must be ratified by a majority vote.

That decentralized yet organized sensibility reflects the influence of Cohen, as well as of oft-quoted activist predecessors such as Ella Baker and professor-turned-protester Paul Wellstone. It’s not the only stamp Cohen has put on the group. She wrote the grant that initially funded Carruthers’s salary as BYP100’s first—and until recently, only—paid employee. And Cohen helped shape what Carruthers calls the group’s “black, queer, feminist lens.” Several men and women on BYP100’s roster identify as LGBT, the group supports transgender nondiscrimination protections, and a couple of members helped create the short film *Get Free: LGBT Rights and Black Liberation*.

To Carruthers, who identifies as a queer feminist, Cohen’s involvement served as personal affirmation: “She was this black lesbian political scientist doing all kinds of amazing stuff, and the fact that she had figured out a way

U.S. REP BOBBY RUSH



The biggest difference between what we did in the ‘60s . . . is that we had a program. Our protest had policy results established. And now I don’t see a real stated end game. Harassment is not a policy.

People aren’t critical of Jesse Jackson because he’s old. They’re critical of Jesse Jackson because he’s Jesse Jackson. . . . To us, Jesse is not relevant.



BYP100 CO-CHAIR DAMON WILLIAMS

to bridge gaps between academia and movement—I just thought that was amazing,” she says.

Though Cohen and her Black Youth Project maintain close ties with BYP100, she sidesteps talk of a parental relationship. “We helped facilitate their emergence, and now they are an entity that makes their own decisions and charts their own paths,” Cohen says. “There are things they do that I think are absolutely amazing, and I’m always proud of them, but there are things they do that I don’t agree with, and I will tell them that.”

Though BYP100 had long been speaking out against the police, it was the group’s response to the McDonald shooting, vocalized through social media and protest marches, that thrust it into the national spotlight. Perhaps no single incident brought more attention to BYP100 than the arrest of one of its Chicago cochairs the night of the video’s release.

Malcolm London, a 22-year-old poet and spoken-word performer, is well-known in town, having won the high school poetry slam *Louder Than a Bomb* in 2011 and given a TED talk in 2013 about

his experiences as a young black man who grew up in the West Side’s Austin neighborhood. The night of November 24, he was helping direct BYP100 marchers when he got into a confrontation with officers. He was charged with aggravated battery—the police report said he punched an officer in the eye—and was taken to jail. London has maintained that the police initiated the physical assault after someone dropped a smoke bomb into the crowd.

Within hours of his arrest, the #FreeMalcolmLondon hashtag started popping up online, quickly going viral and turning London into something of a martyr. Tweets and Facebook posts continued throughout the night and into the next day. The morning after London’s arrest, a group of black aldermen held a press conference in support of his release. The charge against him was dropped later that morning, and at 2 p.m., London emerged on the courthouse steps, wearing a knee-length wool coat over his BYP100 “Unapologetically Black” T-shirt, arm in arm with Carruthers. Chants of “We ready! We comin’!”—a common BYP100 refrain—rang out from the crowd.

That *(continued on page 113)*

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uplifting moment quickly soured, though, when, days later, a young woman wrote an open letter that was posted on Facebook accusing London of sexually assaulting her in 2012. The woman did not go to the police, and no charges have been brought against London in the matter. BYP100 quickly responded with a statement on its Facebook page: “As an organization rooted in a Black queer feminist framework, we take reports of sexual assault extremely seriously.” The group suspended London’s membership and initiated a mediation between London and his accuser to try to work out a resolution outside of the criminal justice system—a system they’ve consistently rejected. (London declined to be interviewed for this story.)

There have been other setbacks for BYP100, which has had to learn and adjust as it goes along. While the group considers McCarthy’s ouster a big win—it had been calling for his removal six months before Emanuel showed him the door—some of its other efforts have fallen short. “We pushed hard to stop Rahm from getting reelected,” says 23-year-old Damon Williams, a BYP100 cochair and a radio talk show host on WHPK. “So the fact that we could not turn out enough young black people whose interests are disaligned with his politics—the fact that he is even back in office and we are having this conversation now—is demoralizing. I think we did all we could, but it shows our limitations as we are trying to build a base and build power.”

Another sticking point has been the BYP100’s relationship with old-guard activists. Though both sides downplay the notion of a generational divide, the tension is obvious. There’s a video on YouTube of the Black Friday protest that shows activists engaged in a scuffle with other protesters on Michigan Avenue. “The little kids from the University of Chicago are trying to take over the movement,” a black man who looks to be in his 40s says to the camera. “But we not gonna allow that to happen.”

Nowhere is the rift more apparent than in BYP100’s interactions with Jesse Jackson. At one point while the civil rights leader was speaking to the crowd at the Black Friday protest,

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a wall of young black protestors interrupted him, shouting, “We are not here for co-optation!” In January, BYP100’s Charles Preston narrated on Twitter an encounter with the minister: “Y’all want a two tweet story about me first meeting Jesse Jackson? First time I met Jesse Jackson, he shook my hand, looked up at my head, and said ‘Boy, when you gonna comb your hair.’ He then talked approximately three minutes about his afro he had in the 70s. After, he asked ‘Did you read my column in today’s paper?’ Fin. I don’t have ill feelings towards Jesse. He’s like your Grandpa. Elders gon Eld.”

It’s an amusing story, but it gets at a larger theme, an impatience among young activists, who feel like their time has come. “People aren’t critical of Jesse Jackson because he’s old. They’re critical of Jesse Jackson because he’s Jesse Jackson,” Damon Williams said in January while speaking on a panel hosted by the Chicago Headline Club and the Chicago chapter of the National Association of Black Journalists.

Later, he was asked to clarify his comments. “To us, Jesse is not relevant,” Williams says. “But when I say that, it needs to stand for what he represents politically. What he’s doing does not cross paths with what we do.”

Such rebuffs aren’t lost on Representative Bobby Rush, 69, who in 1968 helped start the Illinois chapter of the Black Panthers, witnessed the aftermath of the city’s most famous police killing (that of Fred Hampton in 1969), lost a son to gun violence in Chicago in 1999, and was removed from the U.S. House for donning a hoodie in honor of Trayvon Martin during a 2012 speech. “The biggest difference between what we did in the ’60s—our national efforts against police brutality and wanton murder of black people by police forces across the nation—is that we had a program,” Rush says. “Our protest had policy results established. And now I don’t see a real stated endgame in terms of what policies [BYP100 members] are fighting for. Harassment is not a policy.”

It’s not only the differences that stick with Rush. It’s the similarities, too: “I think it would be a disservice to ignore the experiences, and therefore the pain, that some of us have experienced over the years,” he says, pausing to reflect on his own radical past and the plight of young black men and women today. “But our pain taught us some lessons,

and these lessons could be shared with some of the young people. That was one of the mistakes in my generation. We did not pay enough attention to the counsel of some of the elders, and we wound up repeating some of the mistakes that they made.”

But Cohen, for one, has no interest in seeing the new generation wait for the baton. “I think we’re ‘here’ with the new black leadership, but ‘here’ is not a static moment. It’s a generational shift but also an ideological shift in terms of who’s doing the work—we’re reimagining black leaders and reimagining black politics,” she says. “This is part of how we make progress and how our politics, both in the black communities and outside black communities, evolve.”

AS CHARLENE CARRUTHERS stood at the pulpit at St. James Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chatham, her contralto voice echoed across the sanctuary. The words of “Which Side Are You On?,” a 1930s union song adapted by the Freedom Singers in the ’60s, hung like a hymn over the group of about 200 assembled on a late-December night. The meeting had been organized by BYP100, Assata’s Daughters, We Charge Genocide, and the Chicago chapter of Black Lives Matter, but its attendees were much different from those usually found at the groups’ assemblies: Most were over 40. Though not explicitly billed as such, this gathering in a black church was clearly meant to extend an olive branch to the older generation.

Attention settled on Carruthers as she finished the song and people in the pews got down to business: discussing issues facing Chicago’s black community. During a Q&A session, they stood not only to ask questions of the organizations’ leaders but to make points of their own. Several insisted on the power of voting as a key means of achieving economic parity. Carruthers agreed, noting that the BYP100’s “I’m Young, I’m Black and I Vote” campaign was geared toward that end. The campaign isn’t just a slogan: Cohen’s research has found that increased turnout among young people in recent elections was driven largely by black and Latino voters.

Carruthers was firm on the BYP100’s primary objectives: the reduction and eventual elimination of prisons and the police force and the repeal of certain

laws that the group feels are prejudicial. The elders might have disagreed, but the BYP100 wasn’t after approval.

The tone in the room brightened considerably when the discussion turned to the news that the University of Chicago Medicine would build a Level I trauma center—the kind that provides the highest level of emergency care—in Hyde Park. The announcement was a tangible victory for FLY, the activist group that had campaigned for five years for such a facility on the South Side.

The crowd erupted in cheers as FLY spokeswoman Veronica Morris Moore, 23, dressed in her familiar black-and-white “Trauma Center Now” T-shirt, leaned into the mic and started telling the story of the successful campaign. She recounted how the fight had started with the case of Damian Turner, an 18-year-old FLY activist who in 2010 was shot three blocks from the University of Chicago Medical Center but taken 10 miles away to Northwestern Memorial Hospital, where he died. After that, FLY launched a full-throttle campaign that included social media efforts and sometimes-daily campus protests to draw attention to the issue, as well as collaboration with the BYP100 and other organizations to galvanize support.

“Everyone knows we won,” Morris Moore said to the crowd. “And when I say ‘we,’ I mean black people. If all we were doing was protesting for five years, all that we see now wouldn’t have happened. We need to envision beyond protest—as in, what does it take to free ourselves?”

The question resonated throughout the church, among both young and old, before settling in a moment of collective silence. ●