



JATI LINDSAY

## Young, Gifted and Green By Hamida Kinge

Kari Fulton is on the cusp of something big. At age 23, she has emerged as one of the youngest and most popular national leaders in climate and environmental justice. Her organization, the Energy Action Coalition, which unites 50 North American environmental groups, won an *Elle* 2008 Green Award (second place, after someone named Brad Pitt). In March she was named one of *Glamour's* "Eco Heroes" along with Lisa Jackson, the new head of the EPA. Despite her assertion that she is more focused on her cause than with the press she's been getting, the attention certainly can't hurt her cause. Fulton helped bring more than 1,200 young

people of color to Power Shift 2009. With 12,000 attendees, it was the largest youth summit on climate change in U.S. history. As national campus campaign coordinator for the Environmental Justice and Climate Change Initiative (EJCC), Fulton also mobilizes college students to push for campus sustainability and climate justice, mainly at HBCUs, or historically black colleges and universities (Fulton attended Howard University). In mid-March, *Next American City* caught up with Fulton just before she visited Louisiana's Grambling State University to interview students about how HBCU students are greening their campuses and local communities.

### What first got you interested in environmental issues?

I'm from Denver, so it's pretty green out there. My neighbors composted. I never thought of that as "green" — I just thought of it as regular stuff that people did. I worked on campaigns around renewable energy in Colorado, and it really frustrated me because I was given maybe three talking points, but I didn't know the issues. It was frustrating because I'm this little black girl talking about renewable energy in white neighborhoods and I didn't even get it. After Hurricane Katrina I ended up going to the Gulf Coast region and volunteering. That was kind of my "A-ha!" moment. I said, "Okay, this is connected to our environment." So, I started getting more involved in my campus and in doing community service.

### So you were turned off by your first experience with environmental advocacy?

The "asking for money" thing didn't work. I had lots of friends of color in the same predicament. You're asking for \$100 on the street, but who is going to give a black male \$100 on the street? It wasn't really culturally sensitive. At the time, a lot of my brown and black and yellow college folks were working on voting rights, language barriers, education rights. And white kids were talking about campus sustainability and going green and saving the environment. And I'm thinking, "How come people don't see the connections among these things?"

### Tell me more about your volunteer work in New Orleans and how it shifted your perspective on environmental advocacy.

I think the thing that touched me the most was that wherever we'd go, people were so excited because I came for Alternative Spring Break with all these people from HBCUs. And the sentiment of black New Orleanians was, "I'm just so happy to see my people coming down to help us." Wherever we'd go, people would treat us like family. They'd barbecue for us. The saddest thing was that the reason they were barbecuing and not frying us fish, or whatever, is because they still didn't have electricity — and this was 2006.

Then I got an idea: We need to be doing this Alternative Spring Break everywhere. We need to be really working on fixing up our 'hoods because this could be happening anywhere. It could happen in Baltimore. It could happen in D.C.

### The latest buzz phrase of the green era has been "green jobs." What do you tell HBCU students about green jobs?

We're saying that green jobs are not just installing solar panels or working on a wind farm. A green job is anything you want it to be because anything can be done in a more sustainable fashion. Whether it's eco-journalism, sustainable fashion or sustainable economics and business practices. We can be investors in this new green economy. We can be the ones who are the decision-makers.

### As national campus climate challenge coordinator for EJCC, what are the specific elements to the work that you do?

The first thing we do is draw awareness to the issues. We do workshops and speaking engagements at all types of

universities. Then we have the HBCU campaign where we work with students to green their campuses. Through the Energy Action Coalition, we help students run campaigns, whether it's supporting a student who is running for campus government or giving students the tools they need to address their campus administration about how they can green their campuses. So, for example, if Morehouse College is doing a lot to get sustainable, we'll use that as a model for other campuses that are just starting out.

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### Why have black colleges lagged behind some of the more mainstream ones in greening their campuses?

A large part is bureaucracy within campus administrations. Another part is myth. We've had students tell us their administrations have told them they don't want recycling because they think it's going to create more waste, or that people won't know how to use it. You have to get past these old, standard ideas. Another part of it is finances. Dillard University in New Orleans is working to come back as an all-green campus. But when you have financial hardships like we do in the recession, we know that as black folk, we're gonna get hit the hardest, especially our campuses. So sometimes things like recycling have to get put on the back burner, which is unfortunate, because when you do energy efficiency programs and when you do campus recycling, you are actually saving money.

### Connecting college students to the communities that surround the colleges is an essential element to the work EJCC does. What are some of the ways that happens?

One example is the Let's Raise a Million program, which installs compact fluorescent bulbs at residents' homes at no cost and educates them about energy conservation. The whole idea of it is more than just a light bulb. The idea is that once you start changing people's light bulbs, you're giving them ideas about how to be more energy-efficient.

### What in your opinion makes a good leader?

I've had conversations with people who claim that I'm successful because I've been in the press. If my only goal in life was to be in the newspaper, then I would be a success. But that's not my greater goal. I'm not a success until I reach that greater goal. I think that leaders, more than anything else, are always working. So I guess a good leader is someone who's humble enough to work hard and humble enough to sit down and say, "Okay, it's time to not lead anymore." It's a daily battle because the more people start to see you as a leader, gradually you can lose your "you." And yeah, sure, I'd love to go out and be wild, and curse all over my Facebook page. But I can't do that anymore because now I have 60-year-olds and 12-year-olds watching me. x