

Reverend Jessie Brown is minister of two congregations in Philadelphia and a community leader who successfully fought the introduction of Uptown cigarettes in Philadelphia in 1991. Working with [National Association of African Americans for Positive Imagery](#) (NAAPI), of which Reverend Brown is the founder and executive director, he and other community leaders charged R.J. Reynolds with creating and marketing a new tobacco product specifically to African Americans. Because of their [campaign](#), R.J. Reynolds pulled Uptown Cigarettes from the market. Today Reverend Brown continues to work nationally in tobacco control. He was the lead plaintiff in a lawsuit brought by NAAPI against the tobacco industries for marketing menthol cigarettes to African Americans. His work has been featured on many major news outlets and broadcasted throughout the world. Reverend Brown is also the chair of the US World No Tobacco Day Committee

CHW: How did you start working in tobacco control?

JBROWN: In 1989, R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company announced that they were coming to Philadelphia to create a new cigarette that was going to be specifically targeted to African Americans. And Philadelphia was going to be the test market site for that cigarette. We formed a community opposition group that thwarted their efforts to promote this. In fact, they withdrew the cigarette totally. It never reached the market.

CHW:: This was the “Uptown Cigarette,” correct?

JBROWN: Right, that was Uptown. R.J. Reynolds proudly announced that they were going to create a cigarette that was going to be specifically for African Americans and they thought they were being sensitive by telling everybody that they are now paying attention to the African American community. Of course, what they’re failing to do — which a cigarette company always fails to do — is to articulate the deadly nature of its product. So they treated it as if they were selling graham crackers rather than selling something that was highly addictive and highly dangerous to the African American community. So yes, they announced it in the *Wall Street Journal* in December 1989. By January 19, 1990, R.J. Reynolds formerly announced that it was going to withdraw that cigarette.

CHW: So, no packs of Uptown cigarettes were ever sold. Is that right?

JBROWN: None were ever sold. That’s correct.

CHW: Did you ever actually see the cigarettes?

JBROWN: Yes, I have a pack.

CHW: How was Uptown specifically targeted toward the African American community?

JBROWN: The color [used in the packaging] is red, black, and green — African Liberation colors — with the predominant color being black; and, of course, the green and red stripes. Secondly, we believe (this is our interpretation) that the majority of people who probably would be using it were laborers and did not like to get their hands on the filters to make them dirty. They packed them upside down so that you didn't have to flip them over, just knock them out, and you pick it up from the end that you generally light, and stick it in your mouth.

CHW: What strategies do you think contributed to the success of the campaign?

JBROWN: One, we moved very quickly to consolidate the medical interests, community interests, as well as the church interests in our opposing what R.J. Reynolds was doing. And in doing so, we beat them to the punch, garnering most of the support in Philadelphia to oppose them on the product, including getting *Ebony* Magazine who also put out a statement that they were not going to market the product. This kind of stuff had never happened before, period. No one in the tobacco control movement had ever stopped the industry from marketing a cigarette. We were the first.

CHW: Did you do most of your community organizing through the churches?

JBROWN: Well, a combination. We already had identified from previous campaigns, churches who were sympathetic to the mission of health promotion. And some of the city council members became involved, the local agencies — heart, lung, and cancer locally — took a high backup role and put their resources, time, money, and energy and staff into making certain that this campaign came off well.

CHW: What kinds of successful tactics did you use in the Uptown Campaign?

JBROWN: We took black paint and painted over cigarette billboards in neighborhoods and communities. And, of course, that was to get a message out that we did not want that kind of advertising in our neighborhoods. And billboards are the kind of thing you can't turn off. They're always on. And the only way we were going to get the upper hand on this was that those things be taken out of our community. We also had T-shirts and cap exchange programs. That was where we would take T-shirts and caps that had an alcohol or tobacco logo, or other kinds of paraphernalia and exchange it for a T-shirt or a cap that had a positive message. We did that in a number of places, and particularly around me going to court since I was the only one arrested for the "black washing" [billboard alteration]. That gave us an activity, and a way to attract people to come down to the courthouse.

CHW: You got arrested for altering the billboards? And you got people to come down to the courtroom?

JBROWN: Yes. We filled up the courtroom. And the outdoor advertising industry or the tobacco industry was not interested in really prosecuting, so all the charges were eventually dropped. But while they were shaking their sabers, we decided to use it for an opportunity for

education — community education. And it was extremely successful. And a number of other groups around the country also picked up on the idea, and did it themselves as well.

CHW: I've spoken with someone who does research in Harlem about billboard ads and point of sale marketing, and she says that a lot of folks just sort of casually do this now, and if they see an alcohol ad, they'll just tear it down off the phone booth, or paint over it, or put a sticker over it. Do you see a relationship between that and the activities you guys did?

JBROWN: Sure. We've given people permission to take charge of their environment and their community. You know, not everybody is willing to take charge of that. And in some places, it could literally be deemed vandalism or there could be of legal consequences to that, but at some level, communities should be in charge of the images that come into their community — not corporate America. And when corporations don't do what they need to do in the best interest of the community, particularly tobacco and alcohol, then the community needs to take control of that process for themselves.

CHW: So it seems that public opinion of the tobacco industry has worsened.

JBROWN: But, it won't stay there.

CHW: You don't think so?

JBROWN: No. We have to make sure it stays there. Corporations, like everything else, have the ability to advertise their way out of this. We don't have the advertising dollars that they do. They spend billions. We spend a few — you know — for every billion dollars they spend, we may spend a thousand dollars on advertising. So we're talking about equal partners in this process. And over time, if we are not vigilant, they'll be able to raise their image, cause nobody stays down on any organization forever. And we also have this mixed message thing going sometimes that somehow they're doing the right thing. And some people buy into that.

CHW: You mean in terms of the so-called “tobacco education” that they do?

JBROWN: Yeah, but we know — for those of us who are directly involved with them, we see their advertising campaigns, and we know that they are still going after young people. And we know that it's in their best interest to do so because they would have no customers in fairly short order if they didn't replace the ones that they lose.

CHW: So, what do you think the impact the “Uptown” campaign was on folks in Philadelphia?

JBROWN: Oh, I think it was more than just in Philadelphia. It was across the country. I think it did send a message to young people that the industry is out to get them. They were upset that the industry would come in and appropriate their culture, their language, and stuff like the Uptown Theater — one reason why they chose Philadelphia was because the [Uptown Theater](#) was a way to talk about fun. It has a historical context and perspective here. And a lot of young people were not too happy with that.

CHW: So the Uptown Campaign had a pretty significant effect...

JBROWN: Uptown, for a little bit, turned into a cottage industry to talk about the old community organizing, what we did, how it carried off, what the communities did. It is now part of some textbooks, as I understand it. They now teach about the fiasco of R.J. Reynolds in trying to market the Uptown Cigarette. And it's used as a lesson learned in some schools, marketing schools. So it had a huge impact in a number of areas in addition to an impact on educating the community.

CHW: What kind of press did you get?

JBROWN: We had literally hundreds and hundreds of interviews done by our Media team; and what we did was identify six spokespersons who had it. You know, for instance, Dr. Bob Robertson was our statistics person. He knew the statistics. We all knew them, of course, but someone called and said they wanted to talk about statistical information, we'd put him up. I was kind of the community person, and I would talk about the community organizing part of it. We had a medical doctor talk about the medical issues around it. We had a politician talk about the political fallout that ensues from such promotion activities. So we chose our spokespeople well to meet various general media needs, but we did it based on what kind of message we wanted to get out, not necessarily what the media wanted to say.

CHW: And so how long did it take before R.J. Reynolds made the announcement that they were removing the cigarette?

JBROWN: In reality, thirteen days. That's what we officially say. It was actually nine from the time that we formally organized to the time that R.J. Reynolds withdrew.

CHW: Tell me a little more about NAAAPI's focus.

JBROWN: NAAAPI's original notion was that we would deal with advertising images that were negative to the community which included tobacco, alcohol, and the media. As tobacco control money became available, and a lot of NAAAPI's work then went into tobacco control.

CHW: So it has evolved into more of an organization that does campaigns directed towards the tobacco industry?

JBROWN: Correct. I would say tobacco and alcohol because we did a number of [alcohol initiatives](#) as well, and they're on the website, too.

CHW: What do you think the similarities between the alcohol industry and the tobacco industries are in terms of targeting specific communities?

JBROWN: They're working from the same playbook essentially. Their marketing techniques [of] wrapping themselves around community and social concerns and needs in order to sell their product is exactly the same between the two. Both of their products take a heavy toll on the community.

CHW: In terms of health?

JBROWN: In terms of health and life and quality of life. Because we know that, particularly with alcohol, and even with tobacco, the stresses that are placed on families create issues of domestic violence and neglect so even the quality of life is diminished by the product. You've got children who may be exposed, and the stress it puts on the family with kids who are sick, constantly sick; not to mention the prenatal issues that mothers have around giving birth and low birth weight babies.

CHW: I read a recent *Washington Post* article about new [marketing](#) used by the tobacco industry that involves naming cigarettes — alcohol flavored cigarettes — using gambling lingo. “Screwdriver Slots,” “Blackjack Gin.” Have you heard of this?

JBROWN: Yes. It's par for the course. Again, all of those industries. The alcohol industry, itself, is trying to do that by taking some of its brand nicknames and making wine coolers using similar names, so that they would then break down the sensitivity, particularly of young people, to the aversion of alcohol, and get them involved. Again, they got to replace the customer base that's dying off. Again, they're working from the same playbook. And if they can cross-pollinate each other, and sell cigarettes and alcohol and gambling, then that's what they'll do.

CHW: So, do you think there's any conscious collaboration between the alcohol and the tobacco industry?

JBROWN: Well, it's conscious in the advertising companies that they use, yeah. If you'll look behind the scenes, you'll find that a number of the advertising companies that advertise alcohol also advertise tobacco. They're collaborating in that sense. They may not be holding meetings together, and I'm not so sure that they won't, or are not; but I wouldn't be a bit surprised if they did.

CHW: Is there any documentation of the alcohol industry's marketing techniques?

JBROWN: Oh, absolutely. Go on the [website](#). You'll see Power Master Malt Liquor — targeted to young black men. We stopped them from advertising their product and that product [was] withdrawn from the market. That was a high alcoholic content beverage. Yes, alcohol does the exact same thing. They still do it. They just get away with it more often right now.

CHW: Do you see any similarities between the role of tobacco and alcohol corporations and food corporations in the black community?

JBROWN: The answer is “Yes, in one sense of the word.” And this is one of those things where I think the greater weight lies with personal responsibility as opposed to corporate responsibility. A soda, if taken in moderation, will not kill you. Unlike a cigarette, don’t matter how you take it, it could catch up with you somewhere down the line. I mean, you know, it’s that kind of thing. But I think we can win the battle. I would tone down the industry’s promotion of their product, and force them to better tell the truth in their marketing promotion. I also think we need a public promotion campaign that really promotes healthy lifestyles, health living, and its benefits. If we get just as good at talking about the benefits and promoting a healthy lifestyle as the industry does at promoting fast foods, or promoting alcohol, or promoting tobacco, then I think we can easily win the battle. It’s like, one of the things we were promoting, way back when, was if the tobacco industry was going to continue to advertise, they had to turn over a quarter to one third of all billboard advertising to public health messages about tobacco, which we would design and put up there. They didn’t want to do that. And the reason is simple. Our one good message would outdo three of theirs any day.

CHW: They’d rather have nothing up there.

JBROWN: They would rather have nothing up there. Correct. Because they can then go to putting it in magazines, and continue to give away T-Shirts and caps. They’re getting a lot of what we call “unpaid walking billboards.” You know, those whole campaigns.

CHW: Apparently, a lot of young people wear these items.

JBROWN: Yes. That’s why we had the T-Shirt/Cap exchange.

CHW: It was mostly young people that you did this with?

JBROWN: Oh, no. We actually got them from everybody. We did this in front of the police department. You know, the police department came out there and were bringing alcohol advertising off the walls of the police department to exchange. It was wonderful. And you actually get more adults who readily take this up than you do young people. Young people always take free stuff, but here we’ll get adults exchanging stuff with us, more than we did the kids. But the point was, we’re taking advertising off the street.

CHW: The tobacco industry has a history of financial involvement in the African American community, as well. Is that correct?

JBROWN: That’s correct.

CHW: So, in your own experience in Philadelphia, have campaigns and awareness and public education had an affect on how community groups and businesses deal financially with the tobacco industry?

JBROWN: Yes. For a number of those groups it has been “Hush money.” And some of the civic and social organizations that have traditionally led battles to stop the exploitation of

African Americans were silent or in some cases even promoted the interests of the tobacco industry or the alcohol industry. Even *Ebony* magazine has not done due diligence in providing ongoing information about the effects of tobacco, even with the huge effect tobacco has on the black community. And, of course, they didn't do it because they were receiving ad revenues from the tobacco companies. In the millions and millions of dollars.

CHW: Does your organization accept funding from tobacco corporations?

JBROWN: Absolutely not. Matter of fact, if a group receives tobacco money in any way, shape, or form — or alcohol money, we will not directly work with that organization.

CHW: What do you think the role of the tobacco industry and their policies and practices in exacerbating health disparities?

JBROWN: A high percentage of African Americans smoke mentholated cigarettes. And until we made a big noise in the last few years, no one had even tested the notion of whether or not menthol contributed to a higher disease rate which would impact African Americans more highly than others. We believe it does because all of the studies, even the industry studies, show that menthol in a burned form is, in itself, a carcinogen. So African Americans may have been deliberately targeted by the industry with a more addictive and more deadly product.

CHW: In closing, I'd like to ask, what are your thoughts on the potential of the tobacco industry to be held accountable for its impact on the health of the African American community, or the public health in general?

JBROWN: Well, there are two things that I think that can make that happen. One is that people really get upset over it. And two, we put a Congress in there who actually do their jobs to protect the public interest around these issues. And we haven't had a Congress that has been out there to protect the public's interest around this. And you know, they get a lot of money from the industry, as well. So they formulate their opinions based on how much money they get. And regardless of what they say, we know that the vast majority of legislators that are receiving \$50,000 — even \$5,000. It doesn't take much, apparently, to buy off a legislator. They have been extremely solid. They have not protected America's interests.