

Virginia's Kemba Smith Pradia Wins Battle for Voting Rights

Written by Joey Matthews
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Kemba Smith Pradia tried to fight back the tears.

"I found out that my (voting) rights have been restored, and I will be able to have my voice in this year's election on all of the issues that I have advocated for across this country," the Richmond native and voting rights advocate said.

Pradia's voice broke, and tears flowed down her cheeks as she told how Gov. Bob McDonnell's office had notified her that her right to vote in Virginia had been restored. Because of a past felony conviction, she had been banned from voting.

"Receiving this right to vote is a part of my healing process and me being able to forgive myself," Pradia said. She spoke at a recent press conference to kick off the Virginia State Conference of the NAACP's "They Deserve to Vote" campaign to restore voting rights to former felons.

Benjamin Todd Jealous, national NAACP president and CEO, joined state NAACP Executive Director King Salim Khalfani and Pradia to announce the campaign at the Virginia headquarters on North Side. The ACLU of Virginia and other voting rights groups joined in supporting the campaign.

The coalition vowed to keep the issue front and center beyond the Nov. 6 elections.

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"We're a country that believes in the right to vote," Jealous said. "It is time to remove the final product of the Jim Crow era."

Virginia joins Florida, Iowa and Kentucky as the only states that continue to disenfranchise persons convicted of felonies even after they have completed their sentence. An ex-inmate must petition the Virginia governor to have his or her voting rights restored. As part of its campaign, the state NAACP plans to vigorously lobby Gov. McDonnell and Virginia's General Assembly to change the state constitution to allow felons who have served their time to vote.

The state NAACP estimates that more than half of the 450,000 people disenfranchised from voting in Virginia because of felony convictions are African-American. Nationwide, data show more than 5 million ex-offenders are denied the right to vote because of felony convictions, the NAACP stated in a release. That figure includes 1.5 million Black men who are disenfranchised from voting.

Khalfani called Pradia "the poster woman of this campaign."

Her background: She was pardoned, principally in response to coverage by the Black press, by President Bill Clinton in December 2000 after serving nearly seven years in prison. She was then serving a 24-year term on a crack cocaine conviction. Her conviction stemmed from her relationship with a drug dealer while she was a student at Hampton University.

Federal sentencing rules, since changed, then required the lengthy sentence, though she was a first-time, nonviolent offender.

Pradia was joined at the event by her parents — Gus and Odessa Smith — and her 2-year-old daughter. She thanked her parents for their support throughout her journey from inmate to advocate.

Now married with two children and living in Norfolk, she started The Kemba Smith Foundation

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that advocates for voting rights. She spoke late last month to the United Nations Human Rights Council on disenfranchisement laws.

Pradia described the process she went through to have her voting rights restored as “humiliating” and said no one else should have to experience those feelings.

“I feel that I represent the more than 5 million people across the country that haven't been afforded this right back and I feel as if they need to have this feeling, too,” Pradia said.

Jealous praised the efforts of Gov. McDonnell, whom Jealous said has “done more than previous governors to make it easier for formerly incarcerated people to get their (voting) rights back.”

However, Jealous wants voting rights restored nationwide to people with felony records. Gov. McDonnell had restored 3,839 applications as of Sept. 27, according to a spokesman. That puts him on a pace to exceed the restoration numbers of all former Virginia governors.

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