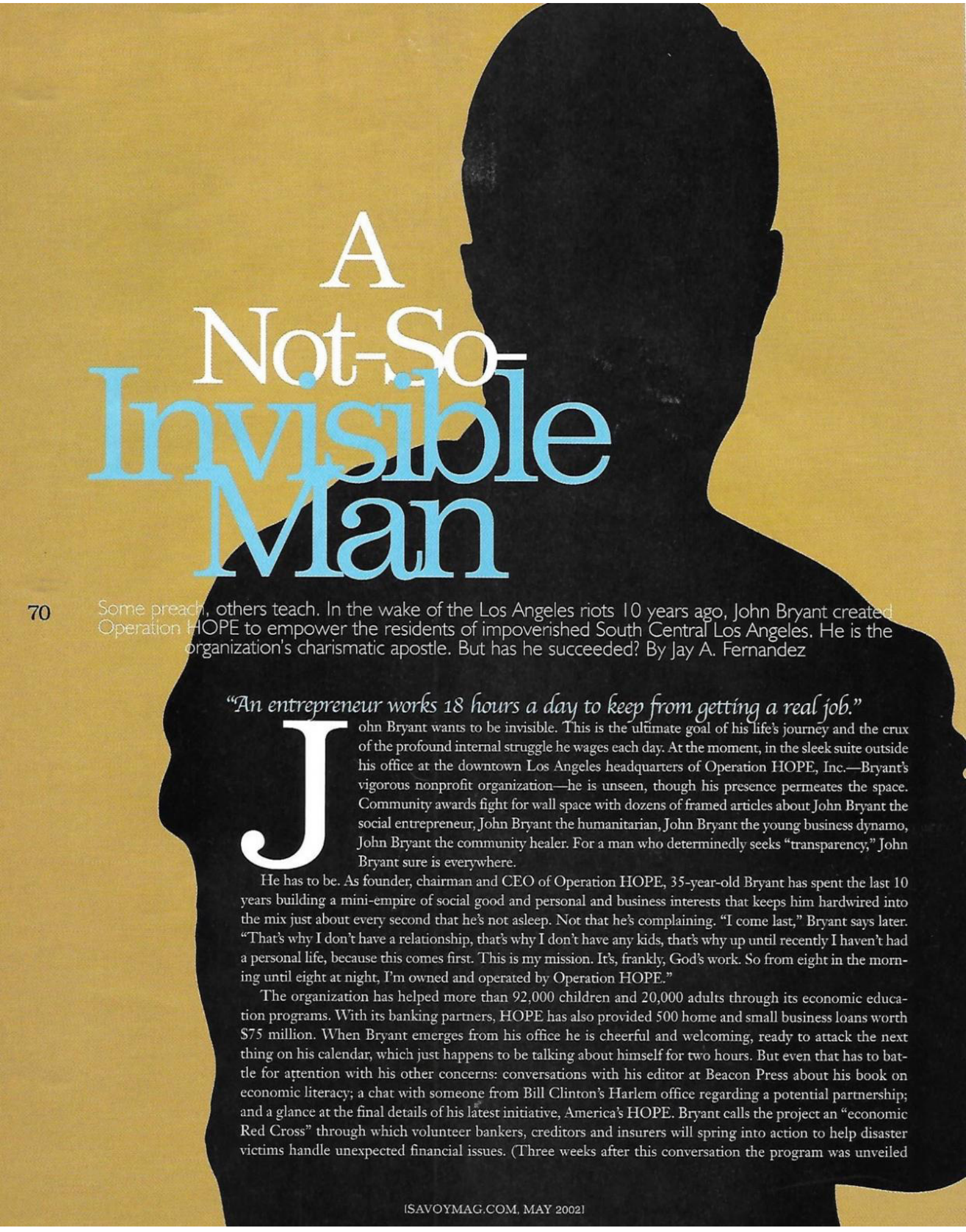


A Not-So-Invisible Man

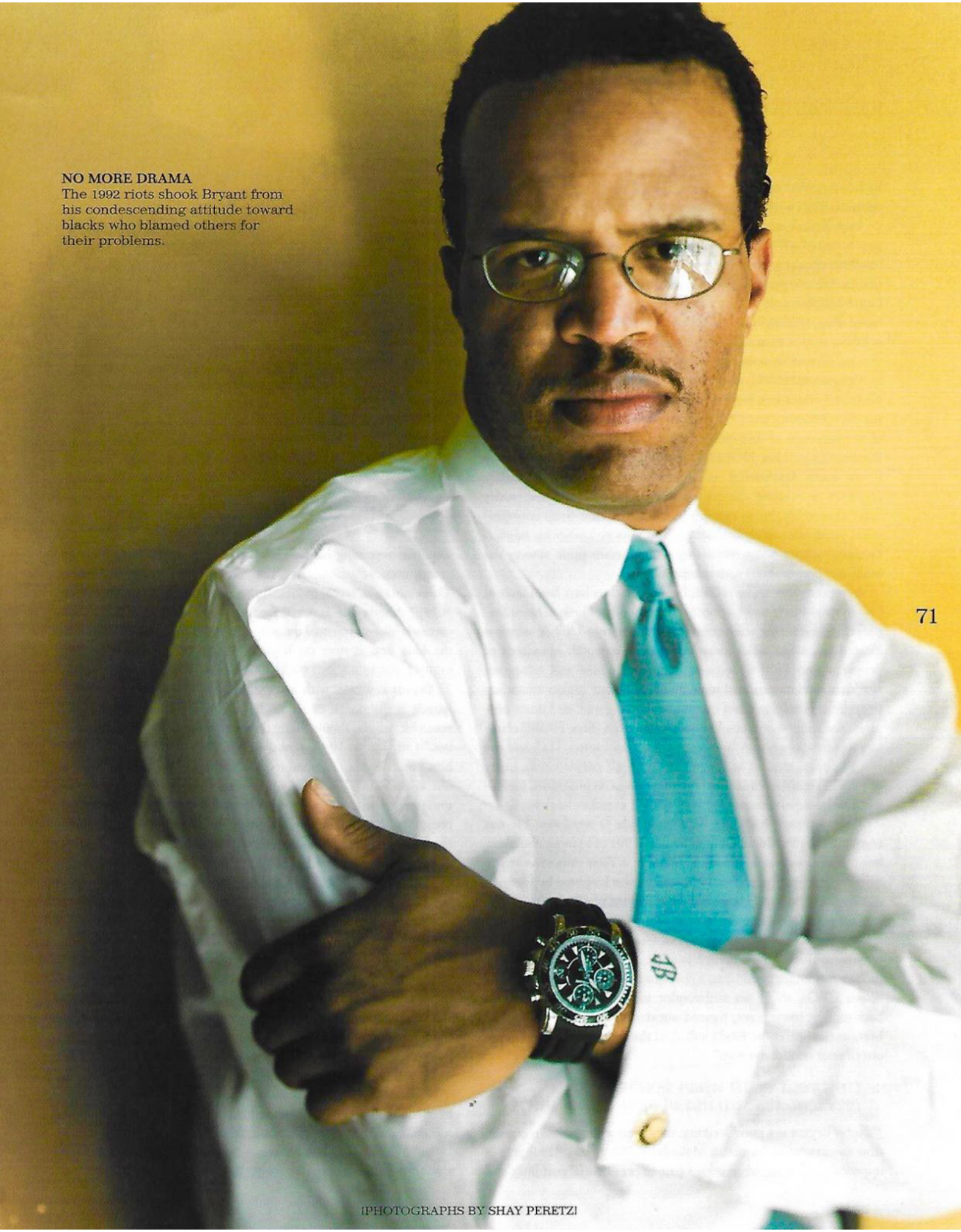
Some preach, others teach. In the wake of the Los Angeles riots 10 years ago, John Bryant created Operation HOPE to empower the residents of impoverished South Central Los Angeles. He is the organization's charismatic apostle. But has he succeeded? By Jay A. Fernandez

"An entrepreneur works 18 hours a day to keep from getting a real job."

John Bryant wants to be invisible. This is the ultimate goal of his life's journey and the crux of the profound internal struggle he wages each day. At the moment, in the sleek suite outside his office at the downtown Los Angeles headquarters of Operation HOPE, Inc.—Bryant's vigorous nonprofit organization—he is unseen, though his presence permeates the space. Community awards fight for wall space with dozens of framed articles about John Bryant the social entrepreneur, John Bryant the humanitarian, John Bryant the young business dynamo, John Bryant the community healer. For a man who determinedly seeks "transparency," John Bryant sure is everywhere.

He has to be. As founder, chairman and CEO of Operation HOPE, 35-year-old Bryant has spent the last 10 years building a mini-empire of social good and personal and business interests that keeps him hardwired into the mix just about every second that he's not asleep. Not that he's complaining. "I come last," Bryant says later. "That's why I don't have a relationship, that's why I don't have any kids, that's why up until recently I haven't had a personal life, because this comes first. This is my mission. It's, frankly, God's work. So from eight in the morning until eight at night, I'm owned and operated by Operation HOPE."

The organization has helped more than 92,000 children and 20,000 adults through its economic education programs. With its banking partners, HOPE has also provided 500 home and small business loans worth $75 million. When Bryant emerges from his office he is cheerful and welcoming, ready to attack the next thing on his calendar, which just happens to be talking about himself for two hours. But even that has to battle for attention with his other concerns: conversations with his editor at Beacon Press about his book on economic literacy; a chat with someone from Bill Clinton's Harlem office regarding a potential partnership; and a glance at the final details of his latest initiative, America's HOPE. Bryant calls the project an "economic Red Cross" through which volunteer bankers, creditors and insurers will spring into action to help disaster victims handle unexpected financial issues. (Three weeks after this conversation the program was unveiled



NO MORE DRAMA
The 1992 riots shook Bryant from his condescending attitude toward blacks who blamed others for their problems.

[PHOTOGRAPHS BY SHAY PERETZ]

by Los Angeles mayor Jim Hahn.) This is just the latest proposed solution from a man who never seems to run out of ideas.

John Bryant is also a man who recognizes that helping others is not devoid of self-interest. "Since Jesus Christ there hasn't been an unselfish person to walk the face of the earth," he says. "The question is: Are you gonna practice good selfishness or bad selfishness? Good selfishness is where I benefit and everybody else benefits more. Bad selfishness is where I benefit and everybody else pays a price for it." He then adds one of his oft-repeated mantras: "I think you *can* do well by doing good."

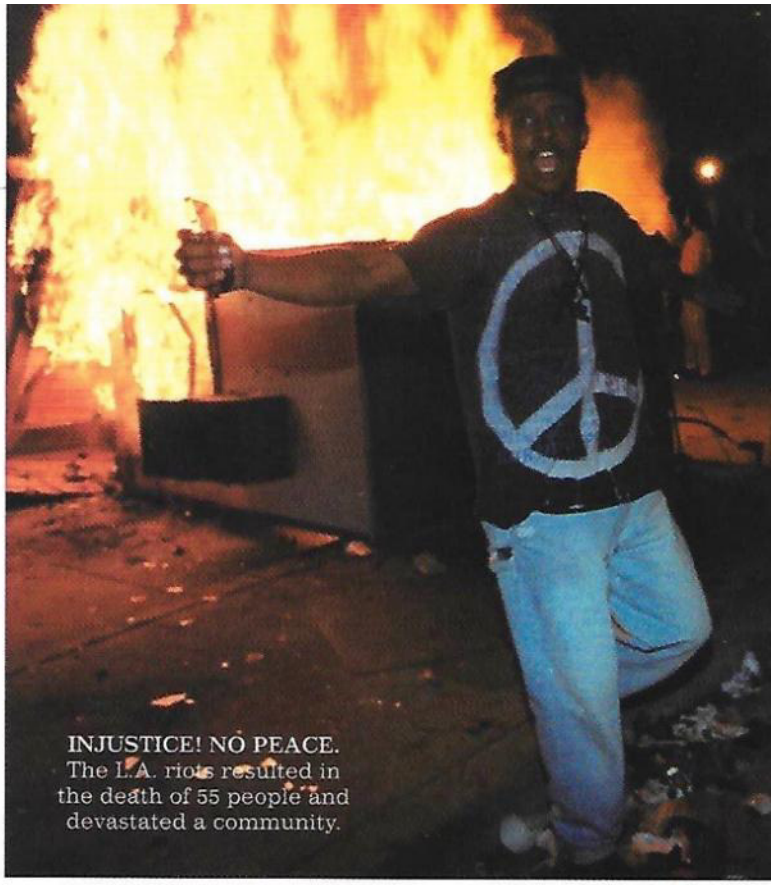
Operation HOPE, which focuses on economic self-empowerment and education, was built on this principle. It was created in the days following the 1992 civil unrest in Los Angeles in response to the acquittal of four police officers in the heinous beating of Rodney King. That HOPE has survived a decade is remarkable. Even more fascinating is Bryant's outside-the-bureaucracy approach to running the organization. His nontraditional tactics have allowed HOPE to develop its initial mandate (help entrepreneurs jump-start small businesses) into a more ambitious mission (increase private home ownership and generate pride among the inner-city community) with relative ease.

In recent years, three HOPE banking centers have been built in low-income black and Latino neighborhoods. These centers feature cyber-cafés that offer extension courses from UCLA, which is located just a few miles away in tonier Westwood. Hundreds of people attend HOPE's economic empowerment and education seminars each month, and most go on to pursue higher education or credit counseling. Then there's the Banking on Our Future program, the Inner-City Jobs Partnership and the three HOPE chapters that have opened in New York City, Washington, D.C. and the San Francisco area. In an ingenious bit of self-perpetuation, many of HOPE's employees are also beneficiaries of its programs, including new homeowners assisted by a HOPE member bank loan.

Bryant himself has garnered a multitude of accolades. He was recognized by President George Bush in 1991 as a young American businessman to watch; he was profiled in a *Time* magazine article titled "50 for the Future" in 1994; and he was knighted by German nobility and the royal House of Lippe. Bryant regularly meets with various politicians, corporate executives, entertainers and foreign leaders. He sees all of this as part of God's plan for his life. "The only reason that a guy like me is allowed to hang out with a few former and future presidents, to be on a first-name basis with a few dozen CEOs, to be an ambassador to the U.N.," he says, "is because I, at some point, figured out that the purpose of life is to become transparent to God's will. And the daily goal of life is to get out of your own damn way."

"Nine times out of 10 when you've got a problem, it's staring at you in the mirror."

John Bryant is a good-looking, trim man who sports an equally trim moustache and squarish Malcolm X-like glasses. He is always impeccably dressed, often with a pair of presidential cuff links and a tie clip accenting his dark suits. He is courteous to a fault and greets even acquaintances with a hug and a heartfelt blessing. Three times a week Bryant meets with his mentor, Rev. Cecil "Chip" Murray of L.A.'s influential First A.M.E. Church, who counsels him on spiritual matters. Murray is the one responsible for the blue Post-it note on Bryant's computer monitor that reads, REDUCE YOURSELF AND INCREASE OTHERS.



INJUSTICE! NO PEACE. The L.A. riots resulted in the death of 55 people and devastated a community.

Bryant is a man with a lot to say, and the meat of his robust speech is the dozen or so adages he sprinkles in to spice up his remarks. Among them: "Sometimes to rationalize is to tell rational lies." Or: "Life is 10 percent what life does to you and 90 percent how you choose to respond to it." Another: "Give them a hand up, not a handout." His voice veers from the low, smooth tone of a museum guide to the precisely inflected and excitable cadence of a preacher. He can sometimes sound a bit like Samuel L. Jackson's character Jules in *Pulp Fiction* when he lets out a measured expletive or two. Charismatic and confident, Bryant controls a conversation by the force of his will. He has his listener signing up for a cause before fully understanding what the cause is.

"There's a difference between being broke and being poor."

This maxim, Bryant's favorite, is at the heart of his adulthood growth. It has become an unofficial motto for Operation HOPE. "Being broke is economic," he says. "Being poor is a disabling frame of mind and a depressed condition of the spirit." The realization that he, unlike many people from low-income households, had a stable home structure and was never actually "poor" is the seed that eventually matured into HOPE. But Bryant didn't always have such an awareness. During his 20s, as he gained professional success, he also became disconnected from his community.

In 1992 Bryant, then 26, was a flourishing businessman living a good life. But he was far from the 'hood and possessed a low-

AP/NICK UT

tolerance attitude toward poor blacks that was not much different from that of many conservatives. "I'm in love with my people," Bryant says now, "but I was frustrated with this passivity, a patheticness that was palpable. You could feel it. And versus stopping to listen and understand, I would point fingers and blame." Flush with his own success, Bryant had no time for people who couldn't accomplish the same. "My life had shifted away from my community," Bryant says. "Yet I was still blaming my community for its own foibles."

"He had become a bourgeoisie black," Rev. Murray says. " 'I've made it; why can't they make it?' It's totally understandable but not condonable. You cannot escape the umbilical cord that ties you to your brothers and sisters. When you have chains and you've managed to escape your chains, you *must* go back and help others escape theirs."

Helping others is one thing, but devoting your entire life to doing so, risking much along the way, is quite another. Bryant's reason for the drastic shift is an indication of the degree to which he had fallen. "I think the $90 million question is, why do I do this, right?" Bryant asks. "The core answer, as I have matured, is God. The answer that I started with was my own guilt."

The events of April 29, 1992 and the days following shook Bryant from his slumber. He just knew those four cops were going down for what they did to Rodney King. He *knew* there was no room for ambiguity in the verdict. But when the not-guilty decision came down, the contours of Bryant's world—his concepts of justice, history and self-reliance—were completely reshaped. "Part of me was running out on those streets, screaming," he says.

"You can't have a rainbow without a storm first."

Bryant is very much a man of Los Angeles and often refers to it as "my city." He grew up in Compton with a well-developed sense of self-esteem even as he watched his friends stagnate and recede into the harshness of the inner city. His parents were not high school graduates but they provided John, his brother and sister with the confidence, persistence and adaptability they would need to survive the unpredictable turns of life.

Lance Triggs, HOPE's executive vice president and chief of staff, met the 16-year-old Bryant at a gas station in Malibu. At the time, Bryant had moved away from his parents' home and was living next door to Kevin Wilson, son of comedian Flip Wilson. "He was very self-assured, very confident as far as who he was and where he was going," Triggs says. "It was obvious that he wasn't too concerned about perceptions of others. That interested me. Because you don't meet too many people—at any age—like that."

Bryant was working as an actor, appearing on shows such as *Diff'rent Strokes*, and networking within the entertainment industry. However, money mismanagement left him with no choice but to sleep in his car for six months when he was 19. He abandoned his dreams of movie stardom and joined a banking firm. Five years later, Bryant had rebounded to the extent that he was able to acquire his division in the banking firm to form the Bryant Group of Companies, Inc. This period of his life is a story in itself, but in the context of the greater saga it is merely a prelude to the main feature.

Just before the decision in the Rodney King case was relayed, a friend of Bryant's, tired of hearing his rants on the "way things should be done," chided him about his arrogance and his condescending attitude toward his community. Then the verdict and subsequent riots happened, "saving" Bryant, as he puts it. "[The verdict] called into question how many other things I might be wrong about," he says. "That's really what messed me up. It created a profound humility. But at the same time I knew I needed to heal, and the only way I was gonna heal was I needed to act, to try to be helpful."

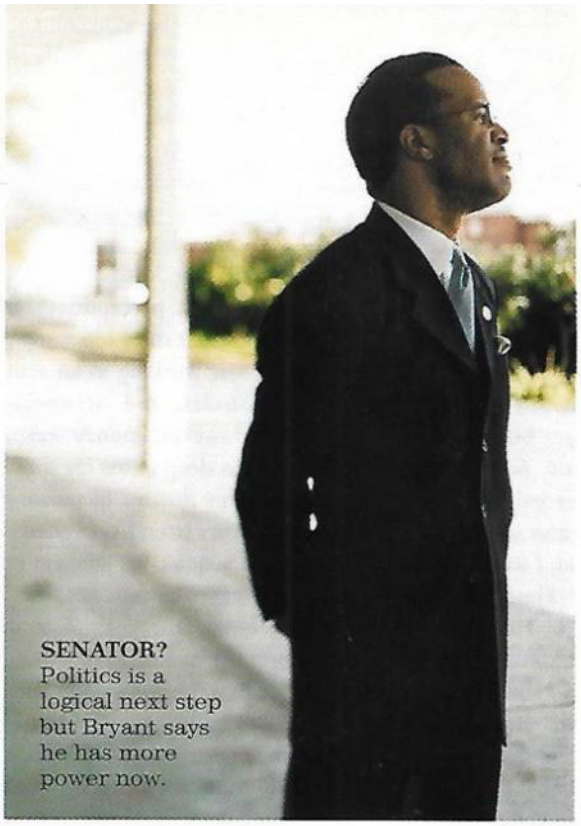
Even before the smoke cleared, Bryant began making calls to organize his first bus tour, taking key local business leaders into the battle zone. Those tours laid the groundwork for HOPE. "John was always a relationship builder," Triggs says. "So when it was time to do something like this he was able to call on banking executives, government executives and community leaders."

And they listened. Richard Hartnack, vice chairman of Union Bank of California, met Bryant shortly after the riots and was impressed with his "evangelical flair" and HOPE's lack of bureaucracy, which was a stark contrast to the state-funded Rebuild L.A. program that seemed to go nowhere. "He's just a very compelling individual," Hartnack says. "In fact, I remember saying to somebody right after I met him, 'This guy's gonna be our congressman.' Even at 25 and coming out of the mess that L.A. was in at that time, he inspired a lot of confidence."

Hartnack may have thought differently had he known that Bryant was sinking $200,000 of his own money into his new venture even as the Bryant Group was losing $20,000 a month. But while senseless on the surface, Bryant's spending was a testament to his determination to contribute something positive—the beginning of what Rev. Murray calls Bryant's "ministry"—as well as an admission of his past missteps. "Give me the devil or give me heaven," Bryant says now, "but *be* something, *do* something! I've come to believe success is going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm."

"Eagles don't fly in packs."

There's a side of John Bryant no one sees, mainly because he hardly sees it himself. It's the private piece of the puzzle he has been assembling for the past 10 years. Most of those who come into con-



SENATOR? Politics is a logical next step but Bryant says he has more power now.

tact with Bryant admit they don't know much about his personal life, which is fine with him. "It's kind of like, I gave at the office," Bryant says. "I give enough of me away. I have so few things that are not owned by the mission of Operation HOPE that I guard them pretty preciously."

Bryant has amassed plenty of material possessions, "things I didn't have when I was growing up," and he earns a very good living (he receives an annual salary of $150,000 from HOPE). As for the rest of his income, [it's] "none of your damn business," he says with a good-hearted grin. Bryant has plenty of female friends and has his share of dates, but socially his life was always out of balance. He sought to rectify that by getting married at age 29. The union lasted just nine months. "I was insecure," he says, "and I got married for all the wrong reasons."

Bryant's home is a reflection of his inner self—his pride in his accomplishments, his inspirations and his internal battles. The luxury condominium has high ceilings, two bedrooms and an upstairs office. He has lived there for seven years, but no one in the building seems to know him and his name is not listed in the local phone directory. He stopped giving acquaintances his home phone number long ago. Why? This is Bryant's retreat, the one place where he can settle down and read a biography, sway to some Donnie McClurkin or watch a DVD from his vast collection (*The Matrix* is a favorite). When the mood calls for more action, Bryant hops onto his cherished chromed-out, handmade Indian Chief motorcycle, with plates that read HOPELA2, and takes it out to the streets.

The interior of his home has the look and feel of a gallery, and as Bryant gives a tour he speaks of his paintings, sculptures and other artifacts with reverence. In the bedroom, a large reproduction of the 1990 Gap ad he was featured in hangs above the head of the bed. His home gym is wallpapered with framed stories about himself and HOPE. Bryant is well aware of the criticisms leveled at him about his arrogance, impatience and aggressiveness. "No one will tell you that I don't have an ego," he says. "You *have* to have an ego to be an entrepreneur, because you've got this bold vision that nobody believes in and everybody thinks you're full of s--t. As I love to say, You can't be humble, but you can have humility."

However, Bryant's mentor is quick to point out the dangers associated with an inflated sense of self. "The challenge is to move from being high maintenance to being low maintenance," says Murray. "Don't be needy of praise, don't be needy of adulation—or at least don't be *so* needy. That would be his greatest enemy."

"If you want to make God laugh, tell Him your plan."

Bryant is enjoying a relaxed lunch on the outdoor terrace of The Ritz-Carlton overlooking an aqua blue, sun-drenched marina. He is happy to be away from the office and its obligations, but the office apparently didn't get the memo. His cell phone rings before he can review the menu. It's a congressman calling. Bryant is pleased and gaily engages in some light banter before setting a date to talk again.

Bryant seems at ease with the rhythms of his life. He flies across the country selling local legislators on new programs, delivering speeches, visiting the banking centers and boosting morale. Much of the day-to-day operations are left to Triggs and the rest of HOPE's devoted staff. Asked to make an assessment of the organization, Bryant says it falls "somewhere between mediocre to just flat-out underwhelming." He is acutely aware of the limits of what he can accomplish given the scope and scale of the problems he is trying to address. "In South Central we've created 400-plus homeowners and 100 small-business offices. We made more loans, according to an independent study, in 1998 and '99 than the top eight banks in California combined. Oh, goody! In the context of the 32 million people who live in the state of California, and the 18 million people who live in the county of Los Angeles, and the 6 million people who live in the city of Los Angeles, I ain't done s--t."

Many of Bryant's colleagues have pushed him toward what they consider a logical next step: elected office. Not surprisingly, Bryant walks with Republicans as comfortably as he does with Democrats. Politically, he is a self-described "principled pragmatist" and he has a very practical reason why this form of public service would not serve him well. "With all due respect," he says, "I believe that, absent a U.S. senator, cabinet secretary or the President of the United States, I've got more impact than any congressman, most mayors, any city councilperson, state senator or state assemblyperson."

Bryant knows his usefulness at Operation HOPE will eventually fade, and though the message and the ministry will remain the same, he may have to change parishes. "At some point you get diminishing returns and you gotta know when to leave," he says. "Muhammad Ali stayed maybe one too many fights. Sugar Ray Leonard came back maybe once too often. But that's everybody's personal journey. I think when I have given it as much value as I can and I'm more of a liability than an asset, then I need to go."

Go? Maybe. But there's not a chance in hell John Bryant is going to disappear. "I'll just go create another vision!" he says unabashedly. "I mean, s--t. Give me the canvas, I can paint on it. It's as big as my imagination could fathom." ▼