

Jesse Jackson, An American Civil Rights Icon

America has lost one of its true icons, Jesse Louis Jackson. His rhythmic cadence and capacity to inspire people through his spoken word was unparalleled. At the height of his popularity in the mid-1980s, no one was more electrifying than Reverend Jackson. Jackson, the most prominent protégé of Martin Luther King, Jr., was on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, TN the night King was assassinated. He founded two nonprofit organizations, The Rain Coalition and Operation Push, which pursued social justice, civil rights, and political activism. I met Jackson at First AME church in Los Angeles in the mid-1990s. I was a Ph.D. student at USC at the time, and Jackson was planning a protest march to highlight one of the LAPD's acts of police misconduct. It is rare that you meet a person who has it all. Standing at almost 6'3, his good looks were coupled with a perfectly athletic stature. He was personable, humorous, fearless, and authentically black. He possessed all the characteristics that young black men like me looked for in a role model. He taught young black men like me that you did not have to sell out to fit in.

One of Jackson's noteworthy quotes was to "never look down on anybody unless you are helping them up." His often-used mantra "I Am--Somebody" was used to motivate students in his Rainbow PUSH-Excel program. My guess is that Barack Obama was also inspired by Jackson. In his first bid, to become president in 1988, Jackson went from being a protest candidate to a serious contender garnering 27 percent of the Democratic field and winning 9 out of the 12 southern states. Although Jackson fell short of becoming the president, he laid the foundation for Obama to become the first black president of the U.S. Indeed, Obama stood on the shoulders of Jesse Jackson when he took his presidential oath of office in 2009 and 2013. Jackson paved the way for him.

Born in Greenville, South Carolina in 1941, he played quarterback at North Carolina A&T University and was elected student body president. He became a member in the Omega Psi Phi in 1960 and became an outspoken activist against racial injustice in the 1960s. Someone under the age of 40 might hear that Jackson passed and it barely churns an emotion but for those of us who were enlightened, empowered, and inspired by Jackson his death is a monumental loss.

For four decades, Jackson was the eloquent, fiery, and ubiquitous voice of social justice and civil rights in the U.S. One feature of our current era is that we do not have time to mourn. We do not pause to honor those who have committed their lives to noble causes. Jackson toiled tirelessly to make America a more perfect union. His commitment to King's Beloved Community was palpable and unifying. In this moment, we should take time to learn about Jackson's impactful contributions, mourn his loss, then commit ourselves to carrying out his legacy of fighting for social justice, equality, and civil rights in this country.

Renford Reese, Ph.D. is a professor in the Political Science Department at Cal Poly Pomona. He is the founder of the Prison Education Project.