

## HUD Black History Showcase Series

Jesse Jackson  
1941 - -

Civil rights leader, born in Greenville, South Carolina, raised by his mother and adoptive stepfather. Jackson showed an early drive and empathy for the oppressed. He finished 10<sup>th</sup> in his high school class and earned a football scholarship at the University of Illinois in Chicago. He later decided to return to the south, enrolling in North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College in Greensboro, an institution for African-American students. He was elected student body president, and in his senior year, became a civil rights leader. He actively encouraged his fellow students to protest racial injustice by staging repeated demonstrations and boycotts, ending much open discrimination in the South in the process.

In the mid 1960's, Jackson joined the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), a civil rights organization founded by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In 1966, Jackson helped found the Chicago branch of Operation Breadbasket, as the economic arm of the SCLC was known.

In the spring of 1968, Jackson was drawn to the garbage collectors' strike in Memphis, Tennessee. It was in Memphis, April of 1968, that Dr. King met a violent death by an assassin's bullet while standing on the balcony of his hotel room in Memphis. In the emotional period that immediately followed, Jackson was anointed by the media as King's successor. However in 1971, Jackson was suspended from the SCLC after its leaders claimed that he was using the organization to further his own personal agenda.

Jackson then formed Operation PUSH (People United to Save Humanity), a continuation of Operation Breadbasket without SCLC sponsorship. It was here that he began the "Rainbow Coalition", of blacks and whites united to push for a greater share of economic and political power for all poor people in America.

By the mid 70's, Jackson was nationally prominent. In 1976 he created a program to motivate young people to succeed. He traveled across the country, delivering a message of personal responsibility and self-worth to students. He was able to influence local and national elections. He was involved in the election of Harold Washington, the first African-American mayor of Chicago, in 1983. He also used his charisma to garner new voters during his 1984 campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination. His agenda: social programs and tax relief for the poor, increased voting rights, effective affirmative action, initiatives for hiring of women and minorities and improved civil rights.

Ultimately the 1984 election went to Ronald Reagan, over Mondale. In 1990, he worked for statehood for Washington, D.C. and in 1992, he backed Bill Clinton for president. His efforts helped Clinton win and return a Democrat to the White House for the first time in 12 years.

Jackson has continued in the public eye, advocating various public causes. In 2000 he received his Master of Divinity degree from the Chicago Theological Seminary. In August, 2000 he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor for "individuals who have made contributions especially meritorious to the security of national interests of the United States, to world peace or to cultural or other significant public or private endeavors."

Reverend Jackson and his wife have five children including a son, Jesse Jackson Jr., who is a Democratic Congressman from Illinois.

