

12-15-2017

“My Two Years with Jesse Jackson Sr”, Part 2

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Black Lives, Black Poverty and Black Votes Matter

“My Two Years with Jesse Jackson Sr”- Part 2 (Reflections of my time with America’s second African-American candidate for his party’s nomination for President -1984)

With the recent announcement that Rev. Jackson has Parkinson’s disease I thought Omaha Star readers would enjoy some of my reflections from the historical times I spent with this civil rights icon. *Part 1 (The Prelude)*, is recommended reading)

Before joining Rev. Jackson to organize and manage his run for President, I confess I was awed and held him up as super human. handsome, articulate, man of GOD, one of Martin Luther King’s inner circle, champion and leader of the infamous Operation Push in Chicago, wow!!

After joining Rev. Jackson in the late summer of 1983, I slowly began to learn, that he, along with the rest of us, was not super human, but in some respects insecure, frail and in less than perfect health. Jesse and I shared very similar personal statistics, almost the same height, 6’3” and weight, about 220 (at that time), birthdays within months of each other and very similar skin tone. At that point (1983) when we arrived in a city, and had the time, we would go down into the intercity, interrupt and challenge the guys on the block, to a three on three basketball game. Me, Jesse and Frank Watson, his white long-term staffer. I remember Jesse would cheat. The boys hollered but let him getaway with all sorts of infractions, after all he was the Jesse Jackson. I always looked forward to those encounters, too many to recount.

Born Oct. 8, 1941, in Greenville, S.C. Jackson's ancestry includes black slaves, Cherokee Indians and a bit of Irish. Born out of wedlock, Jackson was the result of a desire by his biological father, Noah Louis Robinson, to have a male child. Jackson took the last name of his stepfather, Charles Henry Jackson.

Married Jacqueline Lavinia Brown in 1964. They have five children: Santita, Jesse Louis Jr., Jonathan Luther, Yusef DuBois and Jacqueline Lavinia. Ordained as a Baptist minister 1968, the year King was assassinated.

Jesse suffered from sickle cell anemia, like many African Americans. The anemia effected his stamina, he took prescription medications to keep the anemia in check. At the height of the 1984 race we mostly started the day at 5 to 6am and didn’t bed down til after midnight. We were all exhausted but somehow Jesse endured. I had many conversations with the Secret Service crews who were with us 24/7, about the length of our days and their hope was, that we would slow down a little. While I was the campaign manager Jesse was the force that pushed us and led the charge for those never-ending days and nights.

Technically over the time I was with Jesse I carried many titles. Walter Mondale, ultimately the party nominee, and his team put in a reasonable day with three to four campaign stops a week, our campaign would put in three or four stops a day. In the early days in 1983, as we traveled the country, we must have visited over 200 black churches across the US. As the “movement” grew, the churches were not large enough to accommodate the crowds and audiences became multi-racial.

Those stops were mostly always in different cities, exhausting mentally and physically. We sometimes were two to three hours late to our planned campaign stop. When we finally arrived, huge crowds were always waiting, waiting for the most popular Black man in the nation at that time, candidate Jesse Jackson. Privately, Jesse and I were never more humbled than witnessing those standing room only crowds, who waited hours to see and hear Jesse. Every day he would approach the microphone with his prepared speech and literally, have the audience screaming and begging for more. Immediately, after we left the stage he would pull me aside and insecurely ask, “was I ok?”. At first, I thought he must be joking, but soon learned that in spite of his gifts, he needed reassurances. That simple humanity revealed itself in many other ways. Jesse demanded total loyalty and expected his team to dedicate their lives to him. By the time I joined the bandwagon, Jesse had several staff who had been with him for years. I should note that MLK’s circle were just that committed, for life. When I left Jesse, the presidential election was over, Mondale had lost to Reagan and we had organized the Rainbow Coalition, (I as its first Executive Director). I informed him that I was returning home to my wife and two young kids in Atlanta. Jesse was not happy with me, acted surprised and appalled that I would dare leave him. I remember clearly, his statement “you can’t leave now, we’ve got work to do”.

Jesse Jackson’s intelligence was totally underestimated by all, including myself. Jesse was as smart as any man I had ever met. He was not expected to be able to sit on the debate stage with six US Senators and one former Governor and handle himself and be able to have command and knowledge of the issues of the US and the World. Jesse surprised us all. I will tell you how, in the next edition.

My nearly two years with Jesse Jackson during his historical run for President will be the subject of Part III of **“My Two Years with Jesse Jackson Sr.”- Part III (Jesse Jackson, our week at Bill Cosby’s House and why!)**

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