

7-20-2020

## 'My hope is that John Lewis' life will be as a beacon to our young'

Preston Love Jr.

University of Nebraska at Omaha, prestonlovejr@gmail.com

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### Recommended Citation

Love, Preston Jr., "My hope is that John Lewis' life will be as a beacon to our young'" (2020). *Black Studies Faculty Publications*. 78.

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# John Lewis: The First and the Last

By Preston Love Jr.

Congressman John Lewis was a friend of mine for forty years. With the advent of his death, I feel compelled to share my perspective on my dear friend, John Lewis, he was 80 years old.

In 1980, after having moved to Atlanta, I became a part of the inner circle of Civil Rights community in Atlanta, Georgia. Later, I became the Director of Budget, for the City of Atlanta, having been appointed by former Ambassador and then Mayor of the City of Atlanta, Andrew Young. John Lewis was a newly elected member of the Atlanta City Council and I, as a Lieutenant for Mayor Young. I had additional responsibilities to “whip” the city council for the Mayor. May I digress to say a “whip” is one who would get the Council members whipped in line, for the Mayor, as it relates to their vote, and their support, of issues initiated, or advocated, by the Mayor. So, my reflections, and perspectives on John Lewis, first occurred in that capacity. But before we move on, let me provide a historical perspective, of Lewis, at that time in his life. This was in 1980, and by then, John Lewis had become a Civil Rights icon. Earlier in 1965, John was nearly beaten to death, on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, during the first of three infamous marches from Selma to Montgomery. Please note, that as a result, later in the year the awesome 1965 Voting Rights Act was passed. For the young readers, may I say, the Selma marches, were peace protest marches, demanding change and reform. (albeit for voting rights). A quick historical note. In 2013 the US Supreme Court gutted the 1965 voting Act (Shelby vs Holder). “Deja Vu all over again.” I remind you that John Lewis was the youngest, and maybe the second most electric speaker at the 1963 March on Washington? John Lewis was **the first** young African American to be known to lead, and to stand up for social justice, at that march. In 1963, John Lewis was 18 years old...Additionally, John Lewis tirelessly, and dangerously, worked in the southern states to register African Americans to vote, along with another civil rights icon.

Before we return to my experience with John Lewis in the early '80's, during his tenure as Atlanta City Councilman, let me identify John's partner in agonizing voter registration efforts mentioned above. He is also a very dear friend of mine, the renowned, late Julian Bond. Returning, I want to share with you the impossible job I had occasionally, attempting to persuade John Lewis to cast his city council vote with Mayor Young, who he loved. When John felt that it did not pass his test of what was righteous for the people, meaning no political maneuvers, no political deal, his response was a stern no. No, unless it adhered to John's sense of what he felt was right, he would not vote with anyone including the Mayor. For me, as the Mayor's whip, it was a horrible job sometimes, but when we walked away, we always left with the highest respect for John Lewis. That was John Lewis as a councilman and then as a Congressman. No Nancy Pelosi, or any political giant, could sway John away from his personal principles. John never changed. He was the rock; he was the conscience of the Atlanta City Council and the conscience of the United States House of Representatives for 44 years.

When I reflect on John Lewis, and my experiences with him, so many names pop up in my head. They include Civil Rights icon C.T. Vivian, who also died July 17, 88-year-old Mayor Andrew Young, my dear friend Coretta Scott King, and more. But one remaining name that comes to mind, when I think of John, that name, none other than, Julian Bond.

By 1985, my friend John Lewis and my friend Julian Bond, decided to run for Congress and it was against each other. They were dear and close friends. Julian Bond was hands down the favorite to win the race. While John was iconic and historic, Julian was charismatic, handsome, an eloquent speaker and extremely intelligent. Julian was the favorite. So, Preston Love jr., who had just returned home from running Jesse Jackson's presidential race in 1984, was the sought-after advisor by both campaigns. What a dilemma for me. I loved them both, but I chose Julian Bond. There were several other people in the race, which required a run off. In the primary, Julian received the most votes. John Lewis won the race. I won an egg on my face. While John never let me forget that in the early days. He was always a man of such high character, he always continued to embrace our friendship mine and Julian's. It's important to note that John Lewis was elected 22 times, for that same seat, until the day that he died.

My hope is that John Lewis' life will be as a beacon to our young, because John spent his whole life fighting for change and reform and he said over and over, "never give up. It's going to be tough, but never give up. And if you stay with it, you will win the fight." So, I say, on behalf of John Lewis, to our young folks that I join in every way, their calls for change. I hope that they will follow John's mantra, and never give up.

I caution that our young generation, as well as our older generations, don't fail to see the leverage of registering and voting. I say boldly and strongly, as a veteran of the many years and cycles of racial disparities, and lack of equity, that in November of this year, we all need to VOTE LIKE CRAZY. And when we do, we honor John Lewis, **who was the first, and true to the very last.** RIP