Happy Birthday Rev. Jackson!

October 8, 2013 By Rae Lewis-Thornton

Today is Rev. Jesse Louis Jackson Sr. birthday and I honor him with a this blog post that I originally wrote in on Father's Day three years ago!

I never knew my father. He was shot in the back of his head by his first cousin when I was a three years old, so I was told. When I was 11 years old my mother hooked up with a man that she later married. But he was never a father. He spent most of his time terrorizing me. And when I told my mother that her husband was grabbing my breasts, she told me, "Bitch, I'm ain't gonna let you fuck up my shit."

So I never had that loving family and for most of my life I was void of positive male influences, that is until I went to work at Operation PUSH. Mrs. Jacqueline Jackson took me under her wings and she and her husband, Rev. Jesse Louis Jackson, Sr., nurtured and helped to shape me into the woman that I am. I became a part of the family, even living with the Jackson clan at different periods of my life. I worked in all of his organizations and on both presidential campaigns. I was the Deputy National Youth Director for the ’84 campaign and the National Youth Director for the ’84 campaign.

Today, the Jackson’s are a major part of my support system. There is nothing Mrs. Jackson wouldn’t do for me. I know that I will never be homeless or hungry as long as they both have breath in their body. There are many things that I can say about Rev. Jackson, but I will share a few from a tribute that I wrote for a book celebrating his 65th birthday. I went to work at PUSH as an intern when I was nineteen years old and stayed.

By the time I was in my mid twenties, Rev. Jackson had helped to shape me and my journey. He taught me to stand for right in the face of wrong. With a deep understanding I learned that God could use the least to do the most. His tutelage was the catalyst for my groundbreaking work around HIV/AIDS. I could hear him loudly, “If not now, when?” “If not you, who?” These words embedded in me gave me the courage to stand tall. His impact on my life reached far and deep. His impact on America can never be erased!

But the truest test of the man, the leader, the mentor and the surrogate father came for me in 1992. I stood in his kitchen and told Rev. Jackson that I had AIDS. I had been diagnosed with HIV for almost seven years and had never disclosed my status. My failure to disclose was mainly out of my shame and my own culpability in my infection, and of course, fear of rejection. But now I had AIDS and the secret was written all over my thin frame.

I remember it was like yesterday, I said, “Reverend, I need to talk to you.” We stood in his small kitchen. He shot me that fatherly look and said, “You’re pregnant.” “No, not that,” I mumbled. And after a pause I said, “I have AIDS.” “You mean HIV?” he asked, “No, I have AIDS,” I mumbled again. Back then AIDS was a death sentence. He was trying to make sense of the fact that I just told him that I was dying. He looked straight at me, digesting the information. His silence made me nervous so I started rambling. He stood and listened with this blank stare, I couldn’t read it to save my life. I gave him seven years of information in three minutes.

But he was never one for a lot of small talk and true to form, he stopped me and simply said very matter of fact, “Rae, I loved you before AIDS, and I love you with AIDS.” Then he grabbed my hand and said, “Let’s pray.” We prayed together in his kitchen that day and made our way to the Dinning room to tell Mrs. Jackson together.

That day Rev. Jackson validated for me the measure of a man. He was not only the first

presidential candidate with an AIDS policy who spent nights in AIDS hospice with strangers left by their families to die, he was also one of the first African-American Leader’s from the old guard to take a solid stand in this HIV/AIDS fight. Yes, his training and nurturing helped to shape who I am and that became a catalyst for the work that I do around HIV/AIDS and my public ministry. But most importantly, he was consistent. He and Mrs. Jackson have made themselves perfectly clear, you do not have to do it alone!

Rev. Jackson’s influence on my life reached deep within my soul. I am a better person because our destinies are bound together. I thank God for his place in my life. ?I thank God for his place in history. Happy Birthday Rev. Jackson!

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