

# A Series: THE BLACK FAMILY AND THE CHALLENGES OF THE 80's

## PART VII - CHILDREN AND THE 1983-84 SCHOOL YEAR: THE QUEST FOR EXCELLENCE

by Maudra Jones

*"I am Somebody; Respect me. Protect me. Never neglect me. I am God's child. If my mind can conceive it and my heart can believe it, I know I can achieve it. Down with dope! Up with hope! I am Somebody!"*

Jesse L. Jackson

On the recent historic occasion of the Reverend Jesse L. Jackson's appearance at Las Vegas' Cashman Field, the above quote rang out from over 3,000 hearts. As I shouted out the last phrase, I was saddened by the fact that there were not thousands more Black families present to receive this vital injection of spiritual and creative energy. How marvelous it would be, I thought, if our children could share moments like these and all the meanings for hope and inspiration — for now and in future years when they can look, with pride on a history that they were part of and can relate to their children and grandchildren.

In the truest sense, Jesse Jackson is an eloquent voice of our times — in pursuit of human dignity — exuding an aura of love and humility, even at the most dramatic levels of his address, as he transferred the power of these virtues to a responsive and spirited audience. The Nevada Black Chamber

of Commerce, the Federation of Choirs, the Love All People Academy and all the beautiful people who came together, are to be commended for their signal roles in affording this community the opportunity to participate in an important piece of history.

Other writers will doubtless give a full account of the sum and substance of "Reverend Jesse L. Jackson Day" in Nevada. In continuing our "conversations" for this series, however, I would like to give our readers an account of another day on which Jesse Jackson addressed the subject "Excellence in Education." On that day in May, 1978, at Howard University, Jackson began his electrifying keynote address, to an audience of twelve hundred educators and interested laymen from 61 cities, with these words:

*"The greatness of this generation will be determined by how well we deal with the needs of this day in light of*

*where we need to go as a people."*

Pointing to past challenges in the struggle for freedom and equality, Jackson clearly illustrates the fact that we have been on a "horizontal" course — that of "moving in" to equal educational opportunities, public accommodations, voting rights and housing. "The new chal-



Maudra Jones

lenge," he states, "is to move UP" (at Cashman Field, he challenged: "... we must now remove the ceiling and go as high as we can go ..."). That is the challenge of excellence. Jackson sees the challenge of today's youth as that of matching EFFORT with the OPPORTUNITIES that have been created by all those "historic shoulders upon which we stand." He stated: "If this generation is to be great, it must keep these doors of opportunity (education, voting, housing, etc.) open, walk through them, and conquer the tasks beyond opportunity" — that is, "remove the ceiling ...". He further contends that effort must EXCEED opportunity, if we are to realize change in our lives and in our society.

Dr. Benjamin Mays

once said: "... it is not enough to have opportunities; our youth must be able to capitalize on and make the best of them." Jackson reminds us that to do less than one's best is a sin; that all of life has purpose and it is the responsibility of each of us to develop our God-given talents and abilities to the highest capacity — lest we lose them.

Jackson challenges us as parents and teachers to believe in our children — believe in our ability to teach them and in their ability to learn. He believes "it is not their aptitude as much as their attitude that will determine their altitude."

On a deeper level, the simple truth in Jackson's message is that while our country now has a significant body of laws to protect our civil rights and our personhood, we must now take fullest advantage of our new legal opportunities to close the educational and economic gaps that still exist in our society. EDUCATION, he believes, is one of the major "levers of liberation."

These beliefs led Jesse Jackson to mobilize his PUSH for EXCELLENCE (EXCEL) program to promote excellence in public education — to help close the educational gap that exists for many of our children — that fatal gap between the current low achievement level of many Black youth and the potential for excellence in all youth. Jackson believes that we must EXCEL, be-

cause we are behind; we must EXCEL, because there is still resistance to our upward mobility; we must EXCEL, because the reality of racism forces us to be superior in order to be considered average; we must EXCEL, because competition is keener and continues to grow with the acceleration of technology; we must EXCEL, because there is a sense of joy and fulfillment that comes in the "victory of conquering a task and doing it well against odds." Therein resides the "spiritual and creative power" which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. left as his legacy and prophecy that it would someday serve to bring peace and justice not only to this country, but to the world.

Jackson sees our quest for excellence as one that must be balanced between educating the head and the hand, suggesting that we must balance our emphasis on a liberal education with vocational and career education. He gives us five basic steps to concentrate on:

1. exposure to knowledge;
2. repetition;
3. internalization;
4. development of convictions about subject matter; and
5. application of knowledge.

He challenges us to move from educational existence to educational excellence by becoming involved in the quest for excellence on all of the following levels which affect education: the School



The Reverend JESSE L. JACKSON is the founder and national president of Operation PUSH (People United to Save Humanity). In 1967 the Reverend Jackson was appointed national director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's Operation Breadbasket by the late Martin Luther King, Jr. He founded Operation PUSH in 1971 and mobilized his PUSH for Excellence, or EXCEL, in 1975. The Reverend Jackson is an ordained Baptist minister and serves as associate minister of the Fellowship Baptist Church in Chicago. He is a columnist for the Universal Press Syndicate and has been a visiting professor at the University of Southern California. He has received over 25 honorary doctorates.

Board, superintendents, staff administrators, principals, teachers, parents, pupils, religious institutions, mass media and the broader community.

Finally, we must continue to impress upon our children the simple fact that "if they can conceive it and believe it, they can achieve it...."

PUSH for EXCELLENCE — EXCEL!

*Our success depends upon how well we satisfy you*

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