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Years
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Reverend Jackson Lifted All of Us Higher

By Ben Jealous

One of the great strengths of our movement is that our leaders do more than inspire young people—they keep the door open for them. The leaders who carried forward the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. understood that movements survive only when the next generation is welcomed in. Leaders like Joseph Lowery, Reverend Orange, Reverend Earl Shinnholster, Andrew Young, and many others lived that commitment.

Reverend Jesse Jackson carried it farther than most. He gave time—minutes, hours, sometimes days—to younger people trying to find their way.

When I first raised my hand to volunteer, I was fourteen. I was short for my age. I had a bad stutter. But I heard that a man who had taken risks alongside Dr. King was running for president, and I wanted to help.

I helped lead Youth for Jackson in my county. We registered voters. We believed we could change things. And while I was giving my stump speech around my county on his behalf, I decided I had

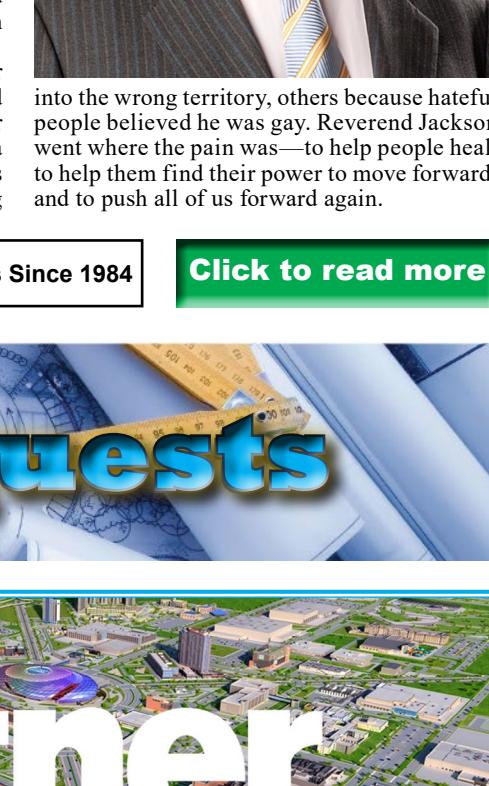
to conquer my stutter. I set my mind to it until I figured it out.

He asked to meet me when he came to speak at Stanford University. He treated young organizers like we belonged in the room.

In my early twenties, after I had been kicked out of college for organizing protests, I walked into his home in Washington, DC. He was serving as shadow senator. The topic was winning voting rights for Washington, DC—a perennial and yet always urgent battle. We talked strategy. He listened more than he spoke.

Years later, when the pressure mounted while I was leading the NAACP, he was still the person I would turn to first for advice and quiet moments. And when things got especially hot, he would just look and say: “Flood rules. Eyes open. Mouth shut. Keep stepping forward.”

In Rockford, Illinois, we drove out together because we heard that three-year-old girls who had witnessed a police shooting were losing their hair from trauma. We arrived from the funeral of a Black teenager beaten to death with two-by-fours in the streets of Chicago—some said for crossing

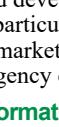


into the wrong territory, others because hateful people believed he was gay. Reverend Jackson went where the pain was—to help people heal, to help them find their power to move forward, and to push all of us forward again.

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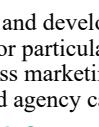
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