

Interview

The World is a Rainbow

**An Interview with Reverend Jesse Jackson,
Founder and President, RainbowPUSH Coalition**



Reverend Jesse Jackson

EDITORS' NOTE *The Reverend Jesse Jackson graduated from North Carolina A&T State University in 1964. Jackson received his Master of Divinity Degree from Chicago Theological Seminary in 2000. He began his activism as a student in the summer of 1960, and was arrested trying to use the public library in his hometown of Greenville, South Carolina 50 years ago. In 1965, he became a full-time organizer for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). He was soon appointed by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to direct SCLC's Operation Breadbasket program. In December of 1971, Jackson founded Operation PUSH (People United to Serve Humanity) in Chicago. In 1984, he founded the National Rainbow Coalition. In September of 1996, the Rainbow Coalition and Operation PUSH merged to form the RainbowPUSH Coalition.*

Jackson's 1984 Presidential campaign registered over one million new voters, won 3.5 million votes, and helped the Democratic Party regain control of the Senate in 1986. His 1988 campaign registered over two million new voters, won seven million votes, and helped boost hundreds of state and local elected officials into office. A hallmark of his work has been his commitment to youth. Jackson has also been a consistent and vigorous supporter of the labor movement in the U.S. and around the world. In 1991, the U.S. Post Office put his likeness on a pictorial postal cancellation. He has received the prestigious NAACP Spingarn Award, in addition to honors from hundreds of grassroots, civic, and community organizations

from coast to coast. Jackson has received more than 40 honorary doctorate degrees, and frequently lectures at major colleges and universities including Yale, Princeton, Harvard, Oxford, and Cambridge.

A highly respected world leader, Reverend Jackson has acted many times as an international diplomat in sensitive situations, over the years winning the release of hostages held in Syria, Iraq, Cuba, Yugoslavia, and Liberia. In October 1997, he was appointed by President Bill Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright as "Special Envoy of the President and Secretary of State for the Promotion of Democracy in Africa." In August 2000, President Bill Clinton awarded Jackson and other distinguished notables the Presidential Medal of Freedom. From 1992 to 2000, Jackson hosted Both Sides with Jesse Jackson on CNN. He is the author of two books and co-author of two books.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF *Headquartered in Chicago, the RainbowPUSH Coalition (<http://rainbowpush.org>) is a progressive organization protecting, defending, and expanding civil rights to improve economic and educational opportunity.*

What did you see that made you feel that there was a clear need for the RainbowPUSH Coalition?

Fifteen years ago, I reflected that we had fought to end slavery; we had ended the Jim Crow laws; and we had the right to vote. But what was missing was that we did not have what I called the fourth stage. We didn't have access to capital, industry, technology, and deal flow and that is the fourth stage of our struggle, and that's where we are now. You can be out of slavery, and out of Jim Crow, and have the right to vote but still lack economic justice and access to capital.

Are the right dialogue and actions taking place that make you feel we are making progress on stage four?

No, because some of the civil rights laws have been unenforced, which is the reason you have these huge racial disparities. If we had enforced fair lending laws for housing from the Fair Housing Act, the Community Reinvestment Act, and from community and consumer protection laws, you wouldn't have had this housing collapse. It was driven in part by greed and by the lack of protection of civil rights laws. They engaged in reverse redlining and destroyed the market.

Second, they've unleashed billions in stimulus money and any government money carries with it Title VI for enforcement. It has not been enforced, and that's why in most states, blacks and people of color are receiving disproportionately less stimulus money than what should be afforded to us.

Dr. King made the case that a civil rights law that is unenforced or unfunded is no law at all. We have a big burden to make certain that we have a vigorous justice department because those banks that engaged in reverse redlining that stripped people of their wealth, their homes, and their equity, have paid no price for it. There has been no deterrent against this economic violence and that is one of the challenges of our time – ending the economic violence.

You are also very focused on education. Is there a productive dialogue about correcting educational disparity?

No, it's not happening. We must support every child equally and have adequate funding for public education. Not education for a few, but education for all. There is a bill before Congress that would amend the Constitution to guarantee every child equal, high quality public education. We must not lose sight of that goal.

With all of the media scrutiny and loss of privacy that public office entails, is top talent still coming into public service?

It is, but the unfathomable ugliness displayed by this Congress must change, because that ugliness, that foulness, rains down on the people. At times, they take these violent, polarizing positions in Congress. These actions seep all the way down to our children. Men and women in the Congress today are talented, but we still need checks and balances and, they need to have the right priorities.

Do you ever see yourself running for public office again?

No. Those days are behind me. I thought I made a contribution by trying to open doors and create fair rules, opening up democracy, inspiring people to register to vote, and bringing along a new generation of activists. So I feel good about that part of my service.

What would those who know you best say it is like to work with Jesse Jackson?

It's kind of non-stop, in the sense that I am in the care unit in the emergency room and we get calls all the time from people who are in need. And people are not in need conveniently. We work long hours, but we find it gratifying. You have to want to do this. This is a mission, not just a job. ●