

“My Two Years with Jesse Jackson Sr”- Part 1(The Prelude)

With the recent announcement of Rev. Jackson has Parkinson’s disease I thought Omaha Star readers would enjoy some of my reflections from the historical times I spent with this civil rights icon.

The Prelude: In the spring of 1981 I joined the campaign of Andrew Young for Mayor in Atlanta, Georgia. I joined as a volunteer driver. I lived in College Park a suburb of Atlanta. My relationship and respect for Andy, as we called him, was instant and wonderful. He was a walking history icon having been in the inner circle of Martin Luther King, Jr, and he was with MLK at the moment the bullet pierced his body April 4th, 1968 when his life at 39 was cut short on the balcony of the Lorraine Hotel, in Memphis, Tenn. Jesse Jackson was also at the hotel that day but Andy stood next to him at that fatal moment. Andy was highly principled and a visionary. Andrew Young was a three-term congressman from Georgia (and appointed to Ambassador to the United Nations by friend and President Jimmy Carter in 1977.

During my life in Atlanta, beginning in 1980, I was often referred to as a computer genius, I was not. I had retired from IBM after 12 years to open the first retail computer store in Atlanta. That background fueled the myth of my so-called “computer genius” status in Atlanta’s black community. After a spell of being one of Andy’s campaign volunteer drivers, he got word of my computer skills and asked me whether I could computerize the “get out the vote” aspects of his campaign. With the innovative use of my Apple II computer and the availability of racial and historical voting patterns, I created a model for election day management that was credited as being a major reason for his victory to Mayor. I was given a hero status in the Atlanta civil rights community and quickly became a national resource for high profile black campaigns.

During the campaign there were regular visits to Atlanta with Andy from the Rev. Jesse Jackson. I never met Rev Jackson during those days. After the Andy’s election victory and during the transition from the Maynard Jackson administration, I was given several major transitional assignments and gained a reputation as a smart numbers and computer guy. I was rewarded by being appointed to a number of key position in Mayor Youngs administration including, budget director, General Services Director, Commissioner of Planning and Computer services Director.

In early 1983 Mayor Young dispatched me to Chicago (while still on the payroll in Atlanta) and I served as a major unpaid advisor to Mayoral candidate Harold Washington. I trained Washington’s campaign on my innovative computer approach used in Atlanta. They loved it and after his victory as Chicago’s first Black Mayor my reputation continued to rise as a one of the few black campaign resources in the US. (Time Magazine, 1983)

I chronicle this prelude to set the stage for my meeting of Jesse Jackson. I finally was introduced to Rev. Jesse Jackson in the summer of 1983, right after Harold Washington's historic victory to Mayor of Chicago. Returning to my routine in Andy's administration, and a developing relationship with Jackson, who at that point I idolized, the routine shortly became interrupted when Jesse Jackson asked me to accompany him every weekend on his very high-profile voter registration campaign throughout the black, urban and rural southern states. We were a great team, I produced the data for his speeches and the voter registration tour gained national attention by media and black communities nationwide. Jesse Jackson was the hottest thing in America. That star status evolved into a chant, "Run Jesse Run", calling for him to run for President of the United States. Soon after Jesse asked me to take a leave of absence from Andy's administration, to organize and run his exploratory effort and later his run for the Presidency. I accepted.

My nearly two years with Jesse Jackson during his historical run for President will be the subject of Part II of **"My Two Years with Jesse Jackson Jr."- Part II (Reflections of my time with America's second African-American candidate for his party's nomination for President)**

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