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Ahead of Her Time: Women in History: Barbara C. Jordan

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ahead of her time

WOMEN IN HISTORY

BARBARA C. JORDAN

1936-1996

“A spirit of harmony can only survive if each of us remembers, when bitterness and self-interest seem to prevail, that we share a common destiny.”

- Barbara Jordan, Keynote Address, Democratic National Convention, July 12, 1976

Barbara Charline Jordan was a dynamic leader, powerful politician and riveting orator whose impact transcended age, sex and ethnicity. In 1966, Ms. Jordan made her mark in political history by becoming the first Afro-American woman elected to the Texas Senate.

Barbara Jordan was born on February 21, 1936 in Houston, Texas. Evidence of Ms. Jordan’s great oratorical ability was witnessed at Phillis Wheatley High School in Houston where she won the National United Ushers Association Oratorical Contest and later graduated with honors. Following graduation, Ms. Jordan went on to Texas Southern University where she majored in government and history.

While at TSU, Barbara Jordan was an active, dedicated student. Ms. Jordan was a member of the debate team for four years, and a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. It was her involvement with the debate team that began for her a series of “firsts” that would become the hallmark of her successful, professional life. Not only was she the first woman to travel with the TSU debate team, but she also was a member of the first debate team from a Black University to compete in the forensic tournament held annually at Baylor College. On that occasion Ms. Jordan won first place in junior oratory—one of many first place trophies in her career as a debater.

In 1956, Barbara Jordan graduated from Texas Southern University *magna cum laude*. She later went on to receive her law degree from Boston University Law School in 1959. Ultimately, Ms. Jordan was the recipient of honorary doctorate degrees from 25 colleges and universities including Harvard University, Princeton University and the Tuskegee Institute.

After receiving her law degree from Boston University, Barbara Jordan served as Administrative Assistant to the County Judge of Harris County for seven years. Ms. Jordan was the first Black woman to hold the position as Administrative Assistant. After losing two elections for the Texas legislature in 1962 and 1964, Barbara Jordan was elected into the Texas Senate in 1966. At that time, she was the first Black person elected to the Senate since 1883.

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The year of 1972 proved to be full of victories for Barbara Jordan. She was elected President *Pro Tempore* of the Texas Senate. On June 10, 1972, in the tradition of the Senate, Barbara Jordan served as “Governor for a Day,” again achieving another “first” by becoming the first Black woman to head any American state government. Ms. Jordan was also elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, where she became the first Black Texan in the U.S. Congress. As a member of the House, her reputation was that of a skilled politician and forceful, dynamic individual. Ms. Jordan served as a member of the House Judiciary Committee, the House Committee on Government Operations and the Steering and Policy Committee of the Democratic Caucus.

In 1974, Barbara Jordan gained national recognition for her impassioned speech during the impeachment hearings on President Richard M. Nixon. That same year, Ms. Jordan was elected to a second term in Congress. In 1976, Barbara Jordan won her third congressional term. Ms. Jordan also delivered the Keynote Address at the Democratic Party Convention that year. Her delivery of the Keynote Address brought forth another significant “first.” Barbara Jordan became the first Black woman in the 144-year history of the organization to deliver the Keynote Address.

Barbara Jordan eventually left the political arena. In 1979, she assumed the role of professor in the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin, a position she held for sixteen years. Ms. Jordan was loved and respected by both faculty and students alike. According to her students, Ms. Jordan always carried a copy of the constitution in her purse!

In 1991, Ms. Jordan was appointed as Special Counsel for Ethics by Governor Ann Richards. In 1994, Ms. Jordan served as Chairwoman of the United States Commission on Immigration Reform. That same year, President William Clinton awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest award given to a civilian. On January 17, 1996, Barbara C. Jordan died in Austin, Texas one month before her 60th birthday.

Barbara Jordan’s spirit continues to dwell within the hearts and minds of people across the country. Barbara Jordan exemplified honor, dignity and integrity. Her lessons of tenacity, perseverance and love for humanity will live on for generations to come.

By Melissa R. Brown

*Thanks to the Rice University Web Site
[<http://www.rice.edu/armadillo/Texas/chronology.html>] for information
contained in this column.*