

He's charismatic, dynamic, and nothing less than awe-inspiring. **VERNON E. JORDAN JR.** has that "something" you don't see every day. It's evident in person—he's personable, engaging, and filled with entertaining anecdotes—and when you consider the enormity of his accomplishments, it's clear that **HE IS AN EXTRAORDINARY PERSON.**

VERNON JORDAN



Scan this QR Code with your mobile device to watch Hillary Clinton and others comment on Jordan's legacy.

A close-up portrait of an older Black man with short, graying hair. He is wearing a dark blue suit jacket over a blue and white striped shirt and a dark blue tie with small red and white patterns. A red pocket square with a white pattern is visible in his jacket pocket. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is dark and out of focus, showing what appears to be a chair.

A LIFETIME OF ACHIEVEMENT

BY KARA MAYER ROBINSON

PHOTO PROVIDED COURTESY OF DEPAUW UNIVERSITY OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS



Vernon Jordan accepts MCCA's Lifetime Achievement Award at the organization's Diversity Honors Gala, held at the Lincoln Center in New York City.

IT'S FITTING THAT MCCA HAS CHOSEN JORDAN, 76, AS THE RECIPIENT OF ITS FIRST-EVER LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD, WHICH WAS PRESENTED LAST SEPTEMBER AT A GALA AT NEW YORK CITY'S LINCOLN CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS.

Jordan's record of achievement in different areas from social justice to politics is remarkable. A strong leader in the Civil Rights Movement, he helped desegregate the University of Georgia, expanded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and led the Voter Education Project, United Negro College Fund, and National Urban League. In the political arena, Jordan developed a reputation as "the ultimate Washington Insider," after advising President Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign, leading his transition team, and forging advisory relationships with top political figures. In the private sector, Jordan, who lives in Washington, D.C., with his wife, Ann, has concurrently served as senior counsel at Akin, Gump, Strauss, Hauer & Feld LLC, and senior managing director at Lazard Frères & Co. LLC for almost 12 years while also serving on the board of directors for numerous Fortune 500 corporations.

SEEDS OF SUCCESS

Jordan's success seems to have begun at an early age, due to a combination of dynamic personal qualities, a unique childhood environment, and a strong relationship with his mother.

Jordan was born on August 15, 1935, to Vernon E. Jordan Sr., a postal worker, and Mary Belle Jordan, the owner of a catering company. He grew up with an older half-brother, Warren, and a younger brother, Windsor. Jordan spent most of his childhood years living in Atlanta at University Homes, the first public housing project for black people in the United States. The complex was located amidst a cluster of black colleges: Atlanta University, and Clark, Morehouse, Morris Brown, and Spelman colleges. It was an inspiring place, Jordan says, where famous people came to speak and eminent professors taught.

"When I went to music practice, to the theater, to the movies, I walked through these campuses," Jordan explains. "I'd see Dr. James P. Brawley, the president of Clark College, all dressed up, walking with a briefcase. I'd see Rufus E. Clement, the president of Atlanta University, who always wore a vest with his Phi Beta Kappa key across it. I remember one Saturday coming

home and there was Benjamin Elijah Mays, walking across the Morehouse campus and I'm 20 yards behind him, and I'm trying to walk like he walks: tall, upright, straight.

"Being situated near those campuses, and seeing those professors, teachers, presidents, and students all dressed up, it made me want to be somebody," he says. "I loved it."

Jordan knew early on that he wanted to be a lawyer. And his mother expected no less of him despite the limitations and disadvantages African Americans faced through racial segregation due to Jim Crow laws in the South.

"My mother was an unlearned, unlettered woman with a Ph.D. in life," Jordan says. "She was absolutely the most influential person in my life. She wrote me every day from college through law school. I never made a move without discussing it with her first.

"The only time I did not get to have a chance to do this was when President Clinton offered me the job of attorney general," he says. Because she had suffered a stroke, she was unable to talk. Even so, says Jordan, who turned down the offer because he was not interested in serving in the public arena at that time, he felt her support when she gently squeezed his hand as if to say, "I'm with you, Vernon. You made the right choice."

Jordan's mother called him "Man," even as a child. This continued when she wrote letters to him while he was an undergraduate at DePauw University (B.S., 1957) and at law school at Howard University (J.D., 1960). It was, in a sense, a self-fulfilling prophecy put into place to counteract the racism present in the world.

"Vernon was an adored child by his mother," says Ann Jordan, his second wife. (Jordan's first wife, Shirley, died from multiple sclerosis in 1985.) Not only did she have deep respect and ambitions for her son, Ann says, but she also imparted a strong work ethic.

Jordan agrees. "My mother was the president of the PTA from first grade until I finished high school. When my younger brother and I were in different schools, she was the president of both PTAs. That was a lesson, right there at home, in leadership," he says.

A WORK ETHIC TAKES HOLD

It's clear that Jordan adopted his mother's values. As a teenager, he worked as a waiter for her catering business. In high school, he attended the National Conference on Citizenship in Washington, D.C.,



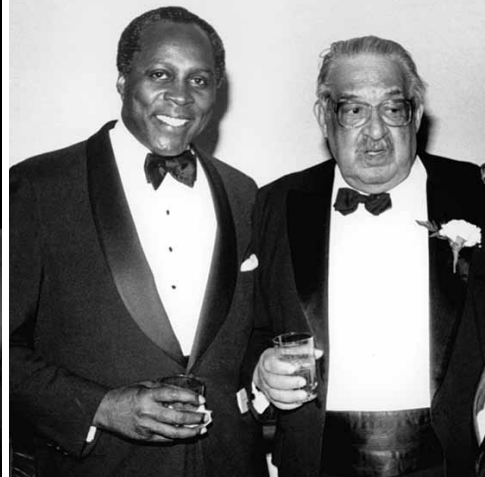
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Jordan with his mother and brother. Jordan with his father and brother. Jordan as president of the National Urban League, a position he held from 1971-1981. wife Shirley during their courtship. Jordan as president of the National Urban League, a position he held from 1971-1981.



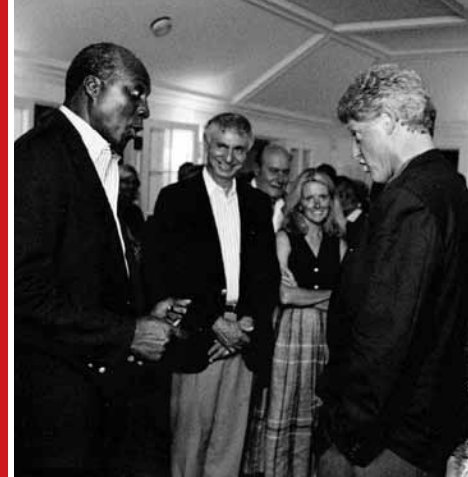
reported on it for the school newspaper, and won honors in the State Negro Voters League Oratorical Contest for speaking on "The Negro in America."

During his undergraduate and law school years, he spent summers working as a chauffeur and butler for Robert F. Maddox, the president of the First National Bank of Atlanta. An incident from this job later became the inspiration for the title of Jordan's first book, *Vernon Can Read!*, a memoir published in 2001.

One afternoon between finishing his driving duties and serving dinner to Maddox and his family, Jordan had some downtime. He settled in to read some books in Maddox's library, which was stocked with works from Shakespeare to Browning. When Maddox stumbled upon the scene, he was shocked at what he saw. First off, a servant ought not to have been in his personal library. Even more disconcerting was that a black man was reading a book. Jordan explained that he was a college student with plans to become a lawyer. Stunned by this declaration, Maddox later made an



FROM LEFT: Jordan with daughter Vickie, Jordan with Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall. Jordan joking with former U.S. President Bill Clinton.



unforgettable statement to his family as they were seated at the dinner table, with Jordan standing in a pressed white jacket and black tie, a towel over his arm, serving vichyssoise. "I have an announcement to make," Maddox said. "Vernon can read!"

This resonated with Jordan because it symbolized the expectations placed on him by society and how they differed from his plans for himself. "It defined where I was supposed to be, as opposed to where I wanted to be," he explains.

Throughout his life, Jordan faced countless limitations. As a child, when he rode the bus, he had to sit at the back. He couldn't attend the University of Georgia or Georgia Tech, which were reserved for white students.

It was a system that needed change. So after law school, he applied his ambitions directly to the Civil Rights Movement. His first job as a lawyer, in 1960, was for Donald Hollowell, a leading civil rights attorney in Atlanta. Jordan worked on *Holmes v. Danner*, a case that resulted in desegregation of the University of Georgia. After a decision in favor of the plaintiffs, it was Jordan who escorted black student Charlayne Hunter through a crowd of white protestors as she registered for classes.

In 1961, Jordan became Georgia field director for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), where he made speeches, organized, and opened new NAACP branches, coordinated demonstrations, and called for economic boycotts of industries that did not employ black people.

Jordan then joined the Southern Regional Council (SRC), where he says he broadened his horizons, began publishing articles on current issues, and learned how to manage the finances of a large organization.

In 1964, Jordan became the director of the SRC's Voter Education Project, where he coordinated voter registration drives and counseled the electorate. The impact of this work is still felt today in a higher number of state, local, and federal black elected officials.

Jordan's reputation as a civil rights leader continued to grow, and in 1970 he accepted the position of executive director of the United Negro College

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Fund. One year later, he was named president of the National Urban League. He led the organization for the next 10 years, during which time he became increasingly involved in national politics.

In 1980, Jordan was shot by a white supremacist who was acquitted but later confessed to the shooting. Jordan survived the gunshot wound and spent 98 days in the hospital, where he received bedside visits from important political figures including Jimmy Carter and then-California governor Ronald Reagan. Many assume this experience led to a professional shifting of gears. But he denies this and explains that he had one mission: to get back to work.

Of his tenure leading the National Urban League, Jordan says he felt honored to serve. "I loved it. But I didn't love it so much that I wanted to be embalmed in it," he says with a grin. And so in 1982, he moved into the private sector, taking a job in the Washington, D.C., office of Akin Gump.

"At that particular time it was not clear that a black person could make that successful transition. So it was important to me to know whether I could make that transition. And it was important that others do the same thing. And many did," he says.

In the private sector, in addition to his work at Akin Gump, Jordan has been senior managing director at Lazard, a preeminent financial advisory and asset management firm, since 2000. He has also served as a key strategist and adviser to many prominent leaders, including former presidents Lyndon B. Johnson and Bill Clinton, with whom he remains a close friend. He continues to serve on several boards, including the American Express Company, and as a trustee for Howard and DePauw universities.

ELEMENTS OF CHANGE

Jordan recognizes that society, in many ways, has changed over the course of his life. "Stunned!" is how he felt when he watched President Barack Obama, a black community organizer, declared the winner of the 2008 presidential election. And Jordan has dozens of stories to share about changes he has personally experienced, like receiving an honorary degree from the University of Georgia, which in 1957 would not

accept him as a law student because he was black.

But, he adds, a lot has not changed.

“Just look at the unemployment statistics right now. It’s 16 percent for black people. We’re still the last ones hired and the first ones fired. We were disproportionately, negatively impacted by the subprime loan crisis. A lot has changed, but a lot of change is yet to come.”

After tackling a packed agenda over many decades, one might wonder what lies ahead for Jordan. But when asked what unfinished business remains, he says, “I think I’m pretty much done.”

Of course, those who know him well aren’t quite so sure.

“I don’t know what he’s talking about,” says Ann. “He’s always taking on some new project. He has so many interests in life.”

He admits to having some notion of writing a third book. (His second book, *Make it Plain: Standing Up and Speaking Out*, was published in 2008.) The topic, he says, might be mentoring. “I’m a huge beneficiary of extraordinary mentoring,” he says, naming dozens of people who have rallied behind him, from prominent figures including preacher Gardner Calvin Taylor to lesser-known individuals such as childhood YMCA counselors.

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But even with the instrumental support of powerful mentors, one still wonders how a man who grew up surrounded by racism and societal limitations accomplished so much.

“I’ve always done pretty much what I wanted to do,” he says. If it meant rejecting “safe” government jobs for more interesting jobs, satisfying his initial need to serve and then moving to private work, or becoming a lawyer in the face of discrimination, Jordan pursued what he wanted.

And his mother always taught him to aim high.

A favorite memory of Jordan’s involves a week in the summer of 1978, during which he received three honorary degrees, from Princeton University, Harvard University, and Dartmouth College. His mother flew up to accompany Jordan and his then-wife Shirley as he accepted these degrees. He smiles as he recounts his mother’s comments at the end of this eventful week.

“She says, ‘This has been a great week for me. I am really proud of you. But I’m not surprised.’” Jordan pauses, then finishes her statement.

“It was what I *expected*.” **D&B**

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