

NAT & THELMA JACKSON

You Run to Win

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." —The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

mmett Till's face was so horrifically disfigured it no longer looked human. Nevertheless, his mother was resolute: She wanted the world to see what Mississippi racists had done to her 14 year-old son after he was accused of whistling at a white woman. *Jet*, the weekly Negro news magazine, printed the nightmarish

open-coffin photos in its September 15, 1955, edition.

Nat Jackson, the great-grandson of plantation slaves, was 12 years old when he saw those pictures. They seared his soul. "I swore that I would change the world. We lived in rural Louisiana, where Jim Crow was brutal and the kids went to segregated schools with some hand-me-down books from white schools. What mattered more was that I was raised with the understanding that being a Jackson meant you are somebody. But you can't expect people to have opportunity when they're discriminated against."

Jackson and his equally undaunted wife, Dr. Thelma A. Jackson, arrived in Washington State in 1968 and soon became key players in the push for equal opportunity, Nat as an aide to Governor Dan Evans and entrepreneur, Thelma as an educator, college trustee and community activist. A half century later, the Lacey residents are still in the trenches.

Nat's understanding of civil rights springs from a childhood replete with civil wrongs. "We were poor but didn't know it because there were no 'poverty' standards in Louisiana when I was growing up," Jackson says. "We were living better than most other black people we knew, but we always shared. We always helped the least, the last and the lost among us. That, plus 'God first, then family,' was the Jackson family motto."



John Hughes Collection

Nat & Thelma Jackson

The conundrum was that the Jacksons—"Daddy, Mother dear" and six kids were fiercely independent yet still mired in what amounted to indentured servitude well into the 1950s.

"My people came here as slaves in the bottom of a ship, neither able to sit up nor move, chained in their own defecation for 17 days and 17 nights, then sold into the hell of enslavement the day after they were unloaded," Jackson says, his voice thick with indignation. And when they were finally "free," they had nowhere to go. "They stayed on their former master's land because they had no money—not even a wagon," Jackson says, chopping the air with his big right hand." 'Well,' says the master, 'you darkies can stay on my place, do the farming and all the labor. I'll give you the seeds and the fertilizer. Then we'll split the profits," which in practice usually fell far short of 50-50. "That lasted right through part of my lifetime—11 years on a white man's land. I know what it's like to grow up being called 'nigger' by white kids riding to school in buses while I walked to school. If you were white you



Nat as a young man. Jackson Collection

could go inside and eat. They'd serve me through a damn little hole-in-the wall window. I had to eat outside. So what does that do to you? You could get mean about it or take that experience and get committed, get determined, get strengthened, motivated."

There was another motivation. When Nat was 19, his 26-year-old sister, Cloraden, died of asthma in his arms. "I told her, 'Sis, I'll live for you!' What that meant was that her life had to be part of my life....So when someone says to me, 'You're 75 years old. Why don't you retire?' I say there's so much still to be done....We're doing better, but racism is still inherent in our institutions all over America, including our state. It's the young people who give me hope, get me refreshed. What's important to me is doing

something every day to make this country better; to put your footprint on this world."

BESIDES BEING motivated, Nat Jackson may be the fittest 75-year-old in America. He jumps rope so fast—a national age-group record of 90 jumps in 30 seconds—his feet seem to disappear. It's an understatement to say he is passionate about physical fitness. "When you look at the rate of sickness and disease in America today, it's unparalleled," Jackson says. "People are being kept alive by medicines. They're on their diabetes medicine, their high blood pressure medicine, their fibromyalgia medicine. When I go out to a senior citizen center, they all applaud when I'm jumping rope, but they're sitting there with a plate of donuts. Longevity has not become important to us because we have adopted the mentality that freedom means we can eat anything we want any time we want, and 'If I get sick the doctor will fix me with medicines.' Most of the commercials on TV are for pharmaceutical drugs."



Nat and Thelma as college students and young marrieds. *Jackson Collection*

Jackson is a big, broad-shouldered man who radiates a sort of evangelical positivity. As Governor Dan Evans' point man for human services in the 1970s, Jackson was at the forefront of the battle for equal opportunity. Now he's carrying on the work of his friend and mentor, the late Arthur Fletcher, "the father of Affirmative Action" who went on to serve as president of the United Negro College Fund.

Nat Jackson and Thelma Harrison met at Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Thelma, raised in Mobile, Alabama, shared Nat's passion for civil rights. She was impressed when she learned he had marched with Dr. King to a huge civil rights rally at Soldier Field in Chicago. Nat helped form a farmers' cooperative in Alabama and went on to receive a degree in vocational agriculture education. Married in 1966, the young couple arrived in the Tri-Cities in 1968. Thelma, a bio-chemist, had been recruited by Battelle Northwest at Richland. "And I was a ride-along," Nat jokes.

When he went looking for a job, "people told

me I needed to meet Art Fletcher," Jackson says, smiling at the memory. The Pasco city councilman, an ebullient former pro football player, had spearheaded the East Pasco Self-Help Cooperative. Now he was running for lieutenant governor. They bonded over breakfast and formed a friendship that lasted for 37 years. Jackson's sad duty was to help carry his friend's

casket to a grave at Arlington National Cemetery in 2005.

NARROWLY DEFEATED in his bid to become Washington's first black statewide elected official, Fletcher left the Tri-Cities to become Assistant Secretary of Labor in the Nixon Administration. Jackson, who had succeeded Fletcher as head of the East Pasco project, joined the state Office of Economic Opportunity. In 1972, he



Nat with his friend and mentor, Arthur Fletcher, in the 1990s. Jackson Collection

campaigned tirelessly for the state Equal Rights Amendment narrowly approved by Washington voters. And in 1973 he joined Governor Evans' staff as a special assistant, specializing in economic development.

"Art, meanwhile, was putting his life on the line to push Affirmative Action hiring goals for minority workers," Jackson remembers. "In Chicago in 1969, angry white construction workers almost beat to death a black guy they thought was Art. Nothing that bad happened here, but the white construction unions in Seattle were seething with anger when Governor Evans and [King County Executive] John Spellman refused to back down on their demands that minority workers be granted apprenticeships. That was just a microcosm of the discrimination I was seeing every day. The only black CPA in the State of Washington told me, 'I've submitted bids on 15 jobs. I've never gotten one.' The system was inherently racist."



Thelma with daughters Debrena (left) and Ericka at Lydia Hawk Elementary School in the North Thurston School District in the 1970s. Lacey Museum, The Daily Olympian Collection

Jackson says he and the governor un-

derestimated the intransigence of the unions and white businesses, including some large corporations, in dealing with minority- and women-owned companies. "It was a constant struggle." Disgusted, Evans signed an executive order that mandated specific affirmative action goals. Conservatives were dead set against "quotas" for minorities. "Fletcher fought the same battle in the Nixon administration," Jackson remembers. "But Section 8(a) of the Small Business Administration, which Nixon expanded from an LBJ program, set the goal of awarding at least 5 percent of all federal contracting dollars to disadvantaged small businesses each year. It became the most successful minority business program in the history of the United States."

Evans' ambitious agenda was advanced by an agile staff. Jackson worked with pediatricians and legislators on both sides of the aisle to push through a 1974 bill requiring insurance companies to offer coverage for hospital and doctor bills incurred during the first 48 hours of an infant's life. It seems shocking today, Jackson says, but when Evans signed the bill into law 40 other states had yet to take similar action.

As president of the Thurston County Urban League, Jackson campaigned for legislation to suspend the liquor licenses of private clubs that practiced discrimination. His friend, Jim Dolliver, the Evans confidant who went on to become chief justice of the Washington



Nat Jackson, a wellness coach, has held national age-group jump-rope records for his dazzling speed. *Courtesy The Olympian*

Supreme Court, stood beside him at the hearing, declaring that the clubs' "freedom of association" argument was nothing but "a straw man" for prejudice. "Jim was an incredible human being," Jackson says. "The governor trusted him implicitly, and with good reason."

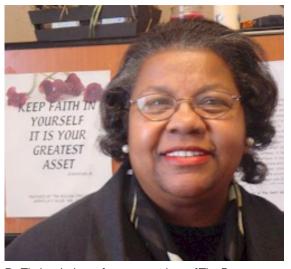
Thelma Jackson, meantime, was busy coordinating a Work Options for Women—W.O.W.—program based at the Olympia YWCA."A lot of people have mistaken our program as a bunch of radical women trying to force their way into the male job market," she told a forum in 1975. "It's not that at all"—unless it was radical to try and help female breadwinners rise above the poverty level.

Dr. Jackson launched a firm called Foresight Consultants to promote equity and diversity in education, and served on the advisory council for the implementation of legislation aimed at closing the achievement gap for African American students in the state. She also headed the Washington State Legislative Ethics Board and the Commission on African American Affairs. Her husband says one adjective won't suffice, but "remarkable" will do.

The Jacksons campaigned tirelessly for hate-crime legislation. When a black man in Texas was dragged to death by white supremacists in 1998, Nat attended James Byrd Jr.'s funeral, met with his family, set up a foundation to combat hate crime and hosted a website that generated international outrage. He made 13 trips to Texas.

Nat by then was a successful telecommunications entrepreneur, Rotarian and United Way volunteer. Thelma Jackson has served on task forces and advisory councils for four Washington governors. She served as president of the State School Directors' Association and headed the board of trustees of The Evergreen State College. She was also president of the North Thurston School Board five times during her 20 years as a member. She remains one of the state's leading educational activists and is an educator-in-residence at the University of Puget Sound.

The legacy of MLK and their friend Art Fletcher has inspired two lifetimes of public service. The Jacksons also helped found New Life Baptist Church in Lacey.



Dr. Thelma Jackson, former president of The Evergreen State College Board of Trustees, is a noted educator and consultant. *Jackson Collection*

IN 2018, the 20th anniversary of the

passage of an initiative banning affirmative action by state and local government in Washington, the Jacksons have been working for legislation to "restore the fair treatment of under-served groups in public employment, education and contracting."

"In 1998 backers of Initiative 200 told voters that affirmative action discriminates against white people," Nat Jackson says. "The issue is equity. We warned that the initiative would dramatically reduce economic and educational opportunities for people of color everywhere in the State of Washington. Before the passage of I-200, state agencies and higher education institutions were spending 10 percent of their contracting and procurement dollars with certified minority and woman-owned businesses." Since the passage of I-200, that rate has declined to an average of 3 percent, according to Teresa Berntsen, the director of the Office of Minority and Women's Business Enterprises. The number of certified firms has declined by nearly half, she told a state Senate hearing. If the rate of spending would have stayed at the levels prior to I-200, an additional \$3.5 billion would have gone to small minority and woman-owned businesses. "That's a huge take-away," Jackson says. "And it's even worse than that by my calculations. If you count what has been lost in municipalities around the state, it could be as high as \$10 billion."

Ana Mari Cauce, president of the University of Washington, says I-200 puts universities at a disadvantage when trying to enroll underrepresented students. But John Carlson, a leader of the I-200 campaign in 1998, maintains, "It's about principle. The most deserving should get the job, the most deserving should get into college. Bringing back a race-based admissions system would be divisive and wrong. Right now, almost I out of 4 students at University of Washington are Asian Americans. If I-200 is overthrown, Asian families will likely be the ones most hurt."

A bill to repeal the affirmative action ban failed again, narrowly, in the Legislature this year. "We're not giving up," Nat says. "We can't stop. It would irresponsible to stop. The implications are terrible for our state." Thelma is equally resolute. They have filed a counter-initiative.



Thelma and Nat today. John Hughes photo

WHEN ART FLETCHER left the Nixon administration as it retreated on Affirmative Action to shore up the president's Southern base, some said he had failed, Nat Jackson remembers. "He didn't fail." All of the affirmative action in this country today owes a debt to Arthur Fletcher. I followed his example. Governor Evans and Governor Spellman followed his example. When I became a businessman, all I wanted was just an opportunity to bid. Give me a fair opportunity, and I'll win. If you put me in the door, I'll win. When Nixon offered Art a job in the Department of Labor, he said, 'Mr. President, if you're talking about welfare, I can't help you. But, if you're talking workfare, *I can help you*. That's the essence of 'quality of life': A decent job. Give black folks an equal opportunity and we'll succeed. When I was 13 I taught myself how to be a barber. My mother gave me a pair of hand clippers and some razor blades, and I went to work. Pretty soon I bought a new pair of scissors."

Before Fletcher announced he was running for president in 1996, he asked Jackson to serve on his campaign committee. "Everybody said Art knew he couldn't win," Jackson remembers. "They said it was just a token campaign to talk about civil rights. But Art thought he actually could be president. He thought he was gonna be president. If you're a Fletcher or a Jackson you don't run to come in second. You run to win. Art lived his whole life that way."

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