

ENGAGEMENT LEADERS

Vernon Jarrett:

Journalist, Scholar and Activist



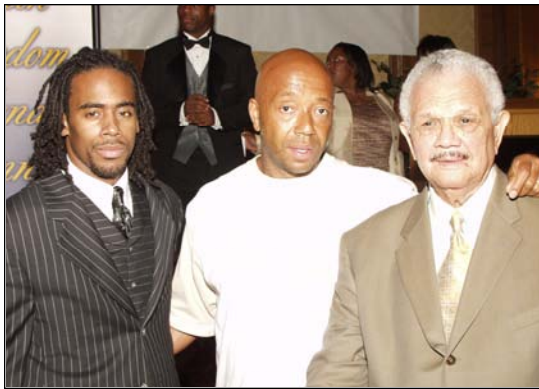
Vernon Jarrett

Vernon Jarrett is a renowned journalist and one of the nation's most prominent commentators on race relations and African-American history. He is also a crusader who has helped thousands of youths in communities nationwide, galvanizing them with his commitment to achievement.

Jarrett began his journalism career at the *Chicago Defender* during the 1940s. He later worked for the *Associated Negro Press* before moving to radio in 1948 to become co-producer of *Negro Newsfront*, the nation's first daily radio newscast created by African Americans.

In 1970, Jarrett became the first African American to obtain a syndicated column at the *Chicago Tribune*. During the 70s, he also hosted a news program on Chicago's WLS-ABC TV, helped launch the National Association of Black Journalists and created a competition that would become the largest and most effective community-based achievement program for black youth in the nation – ACT-SO (Afro-Academic, Cultural, Technological and Scientific Olympics).

Jarrett launched ACT-SO in Chicago in 1976 when he was chairman of the board of that city's DuSable Museum of African-American History. The program was transferred to the NAACP in 1977 and became an awards ceremony for exceptional students of color nationwide. Students must compete in a local ACT-SO program sponsored by a NAACP branch to qualify for the national ACT-SO competition. Hundreds have received scholarships by competing in categories such as biology, chemistry, physics, music, playwriting, poetry, filmmaking and music. For his many community initiatives, the NAACP honored Jarrett, making him the first recipient of its James Weldon Johnson Achievement Award. After a stint as a columnist for the *Chicago Sun Times* and a period as a writer for a now defunct syndication service, Jarrett returned to the *Chicago Defender* to reprise his column.



Jarrett with NAACP Young Adult Division Chief, Jeff Johnson and hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons and Jarrett at the ACT-SO competition.

The former visiting professor of history at Northwestern University continues to launch initiatives to encourage academic achievement. In 1998, he conceived a self-education program for children and their parents called “Freedom Readers” – a spin-off on the Freedom Riders of the Civil Rights movement.

Jarrett recently took time to discuss his life as an engagement leader with *Context*.

Q: *Before we talk about your life as an activist and journalist, including your creation of the NAACP’s ACT-SO program, please talk about your latest major community initiative – the Freedom Readers.*

A: It’s still in the pilot stage. These are high school kids who get in the habit of expressing themselves properly, enunciating words and just

the simple habit of being able to read and write with consistency and precision. We don’t have any paid staff...I do have the cooperation of the *Chicago Defender*. They’re going to let the kids write for the paper. We’re including anyone who wants to be a playwright or a writer or a newspaper reporter, or a lawyer – anyone who’s going to have to get out and express themselves in a literary or a vocal sense. And we have a lot of fun with it. We read from Frederick Douglass and (W.E.B.) DuBois (historian and activist) and others.

Q: *These days, journalists generally don’t get involved in trying to help communities. What motivated you?*

A: I’ve been in journalism for over 50 years, and I’m from that generation that entered the media as a cause-oriented people. We didn’t do it just to be journalists. We were going to change the world,

or at least alter it in some fashion. That was a generation of black-consciousness journalists. And that shaped my whole way of thinking. That's how I happen to spend some time with (W.E.B.) DuBois and Paul Robeson (actor and activist), A. Philip Randolph (union organizer) and people like that...I've never done just one aspect of journalism. For 30 years I was on Channel 7 ABC, doing a talk show, interviewing people. And even on that program, I started a thing of having kids be co-hosts with me on my show. Even sixth and seventh graders would co-host the show. They'd come on the air and say, "Hello, I'm so-and-so and so-and-so and now here's Vernon Jarrett." I'll bet you I got three or four of them in the media.

Q: *There are a lot of journalists who aren't even aware of this tradition of activist journalism or public service journalism or crusader journalism. Any thoughts?*

A: Well, you see, my habits run deep. I still consider myself an activist-journalist. There was an activist element, even when I covered sports. When I interviewed Satchel Paige, there was a motive to my madness. I interviewed Paige, Larry Doby, Jackie Robinson, all the black pioneers in

sports. And sometimes it can hurt you too in a sense. A lot of people thought I was too much of an activist.

Q: *You're also a historian who encourages the study of history?*

A: Yes, Dubois is particularly important. He wrote "*Black Reconstruction*," citing the noble points in the history of reconstruction. And he wrote "*The World and Africa*," bringing us a global historical perspective. I have abstracted some of the most potent statements DuBois made in his books and his essays and his speeches. And the students (in the Freedom Readers program) are reciting them to each other.

Q: *Why did you want to become a journalist?*

A: You know, we had a dual purpose in wanting to become journalists. I'm speaking about most of the blacks of my generation. We were imbued with the desire to alter the picture of us that had been painted in all the major institutions. Every institution of western civilization was twisted and reinvented and designed to diminish the image of black people as full-fledged members of the



Winners at a recent ACT-SO awards ceremony.

human race. And they had to do that in order to justify the treatment of blacks. Every major institution, including churches, had to refashion their concepts in order to justify or defend slavery or the acceptance of slavery.

Q: *So you saw journalism as a way of dealing with injustice?*

A: Yes. And then when you're a small boy in the South, as I was, and you never saw black people presented in any of the white publications as bona fide human members of society. In Tennessee where I lived, they had the famous paper called the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, which had an awful cartoon on the front page that they carried almost every day called Hambone. This cartoon had big, thick, wide-mouthed black man making some kind of pathetic statement implying that the white folks were superior – on the front page.

And when you look back at the history of the black press – all the way back from March of 1827 when John Russwurm and Samuel Cornish published the first black newspaper – they were not in it for fun or as just a profession. They were in it to change concepts and to speak for themselves.

So this is the image that I grew up nurturing. Rising to the top at a major newspaper or becoming evening TV news anchor – that sort of thing never entered our minds.

Q: *Some say that journalists should not engage with communities to deal with societal problems. They claim that detachment is necessary to ensure objectivity and fairness in coverage. What do you say to that?*

A: Detachment is very nice if detachment would produce the type of objectivity that we claim that

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we want. But it doesn't. Nobody's detached. Every human being who is on a newspaper came out of the set of psychological or social circumstances that has helped shape their ability to interpret what is significant, to determine significance in a story. It's unavoidable. We all make judgments. Well, what are you going to have in the lead paragraph? What are you going to have in paragraph 3 or 4 of your story? What is significant? Those judgments come from prior experiences with all of us. So what I'm saying is my black experience has as much right to have relevance as somebody else's white experience. And why should I have to look at the world through white lenses?

Q: *Talk about the origins of the idea to create ACT-50. Where did that come from? What were you thinking?*

A: Well, here is one origin. I taught history too for a while at local colleges here – including two years at Northwestern – and I noticed one thing about some of the black

students. They had very little understanding of how African-Americans actually overcame the idea that they were inferior. Historically, blacks erased this notion by performing with excellence and by witnessing the excellent performance of other blacks. Let me give you one example. When my older brother graduated from high school, the people of the community came out to the graduation and had him and another graduate perform in

an oratorical contest, the valedictorian and the salutatorian, for a \$300 prize. Church members and the women's club members provided the prize. They got so turned on listening to these two young men talk that, instead of making it a contest, they decided to award them both \$300. And folks came in bearing gifts to them like they had just won the

Olympics. I heard that same story from Dr. Percy Julian, the scientist. There was a delegation at the railroad station when he left Montgomery,

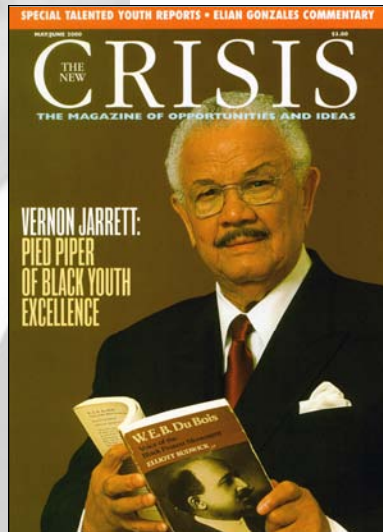


Photo courtesy of Carmen de Jesus and Crisis Magazine.

Alabama, in 1920 to come to Greencastle, Indiana, to go to DePauw University, despite the fact that he had hardly any high school education. And all the way down the line, I've noticed in the history of most of the black people I interviewed, there was a dual, cross relationship between black people celebrating success and the effect that it had on the recipient as well as the giver. This is how ACT-SO started. I decided we needed to celebrate excellence. I decided to do it by having 24 categories, including all the hard sciences, and have kids compete and recognize them as though they were celebrities. That was 26 years ago. We had some slogans like "a poet has a right to be a hero," and "a scholar has a right to be a hero." And we also turned the other slogan around that said – you know, "black is beautiful." We said, "black is brilliant." That's what we had on our T-shirts and everywhere else. And when the kids marched in, and you should have seen the effect it had when they started marching in together into the auditorium at the awards ceremony at the NAACP. Former NAACP Executive Director Ben Hooks will tell you. People were crying. Black folks were crying and just shouting and screaming to see thousands of young people from all over the country march in, bearing banners having to do

with chemistry and biology and physics. So I discovered quickly that this idea was worthy. And then Hooks promoted it at the NAACP.

Q: *Who are some of the famous ACT-SO contestants?*

A: In February I bought a \$195 ticket to go to the Metropolitan Opera. One of the ACT-SO kids did her debut there in "Don Giovanni." Her name is Nicole Heaston, from a high school not too far from where I live. Also, there's Roy Hargrove, Emmy-winning trumpeter. I introduced him (Hargrove) at an ACT-SO event when he was a junior in high school, and he didn't even win anything, to show you the level of competition. I had to beg him to not feel bad about it and to come back the next year. He came back and won. John Singleton (film director) can tell you that the two years he spent in ACT-SO. He never won even a trip to the finals. ACT-SO is not the cause of these people achieving but it certainly encouraged them. During the finals, these kids get to a big city, and there is a banquet hall that's big enough to hold 2,000 people – bigger than that. You see science projects, chemistry, biology, physics, mathematics projects. Then you see the

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arts, oil painting, sketching. And then to see some of these performances, they're out of sight. Six of the key dancers in Alvin Ailey's Dance Theater of Harlem have been through ACT-SO.

Q: *What have you done to encourage interest in the sciences?*

A: We've taken kids to see five lift-offs involving black astronauts. We've had some kids whose space projects have been tested in outer space. NASA has cooperated beautifully with us.

Q: *You've explained the need of ACT-SO and provided anecdotes on its effectiveness, how it has transformed lives. So let's go to this one. Do you believe generally that journalists should be engaged, more connected with their communities and, if so, why?*

A: Whether you're a black millionaire or anybody who's black and famous – you cannot escape your racial identity in this society. Some say, "I'm tired of being looked at as a black person because I'm a human being first." That's well and good but at some point you've got to acknowledge and care about the disparity in

opportunity, disparity in grade point averages, disparity in ACT and SAT scores, disparity in the jail occupancy. When you look at the recent statistics on the number of Black people in jail in comparison with other people, you cannot escape the fact of racial injustice.

Q: *What about journalists who are not black? I mean do you think that all journalists should be more engaged and better connected to communities?*

A: Yes. And many of them are. You see, I object to the notion that blacks should be the only activists for justice for blacks.

Q: *To the question of good journalism, how does caring about the community and being involved in an activist way make you a better journalist?*

A: It doesn't mean that you slant stories to uplift people or make them look good. Being involved makes you knowledgeable and sensitive about what you write. It makes you want to tell the truth because if you don't, you're doing a disservice. ■