



Barbara Jordan in 1976.
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Jordan, Barbara (1936-1996)

by Linda Rapp

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Barbara Jordan gained national attention for her intelligence, acumen, and oratorical skill as a member of the United States House of Representatives Judiciary Committee during hearings on the articles of impeachment against Richard Nixon over the Watergate scandal. In her career as a legislator and educator she was a vigorous proponent of equal rights, especially for African Americans and women. A deeply closeted lesbian, she did not, however, speak out for the cause of glbtq rights.

The Jordan family has deep roots in Texas. Barbara Jordan's great-grandfather Edward A. Patton served in the state legislature in the early 1890s, one of the last African Americans elected until Jordan became a state senator in 1966. By the time of Jordan's birth on February 21, 1936 in Houston, the family fortunes had declined; her mother, Arlyne Patten Jordan, was a maid, and her father, Benjamin Meredith Jordan, was a warehouse employee who eventually also worked as a minister in the Baptist church.

Jordan attended Houston public schools, where she excelled academically. During her senior year her speaking skills were recognized when she won a national oratory contest sponsored by the Baptist church.

Following her graduation in 1952 Jordan enrolled at Houston's all-black Texas Southern University, where she became a stand-out on the extremely successful debate team.

After graduating magna cum laude from Texas Southern in 1956 with a degree in political science and history, Jordan entered law school at Boston University. Throughout her youth Jordan had had first-hand experience of racism, but at Boston she encountered sexism. She recalled that the law school professors "just tolerated" the "ladies." Jordan persevered, however, earning her degree in 1959, after which she returned to Houston to practice law.

As the 1960 presidential election approached, Jordan became a volunteer with John F. Kennedy's campaign. She quickly became engrossed in the effort and moved from doing routine clerical tasks to working on a drive to turn out the city's African-American voters.

Buoyed by the success of the undertaking, Jordan decided to run for office herself. Her campaigns for the state House of Representatives in 1962 and 1964 ended in defeat, but they helped her establish a solid following. She was elected to the state Senate in her third run for office in 1966.

As a senator, Jordan championed the causes of fair housing and employment, minimum wage laws, and protection of the voting rights of minorities. Her political astuteness and effectiveness led her fellow Texan President Lyndon B. Johnson to seek her advice on fair housing legislation. Because of her record of accomplishment Jordan was chosen as the outstanding freshman senator in her first year in the legislature.

After six years of service in the state Senate, Jordan mounted a campaign for the United States House of Representatives in 1972. She won in a landslide. At the recommendation of former President Johnson, she was appointed to the Judiciary Committee.

It was as a member of this committee that Jordan came to nationwide attention during the hearings on the articles of impeachment against Richard Nixon in 1974. Her intelligence and eloquence during the long and difficult proceedings brought her widespread respect and made her a rising political star.

Chosen to deliver a keynote address at the 1976 Democratic National Convention, Jordan gave a typically stirring speech. During the campaign she worked diligently to bring out the vote for Jimmy Carter, who had considered her as a possible running mate. After his election Carter offered Jordan the post of ambassador to the United Nations, which she declined.

Jordan stunned her constituents and colleagues by announcing in late 1977 that she would not run for a fourth term in the House of Representatives. The reason for her decision, which she did not reveal publicly, was that she had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis.

Among the few privy to Jordan's medical condition was Nancy Earl. Jordan and Earl had met on a camping trip in the late 1960s and had quickly become close. In 1976 they bought property near Austin together and built a house.

Shortly after Jordan's announcement that she would not seek reelection, Earl joined her in Washington as a "special assistant" during her final year in office.

Once back in Austin in 1979, Jordan was appointed to the Lyndon Johnson Chair in National Policy at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas. Earl, an educational psychologist, also worked at the university in its testing and evaluation center.

Jordan remained largely out of the public eye for several years, but in 1987 she appeared before Congress to oppose the nomination of conservative homophobe Robert Bork to the United States Supreme Court. She addressed the Democratic National Convention the following year, seconding the vice-presidential nomination of fellow Texan Lloyd Bentsen.

In July 1988 Jordan suffered a heart attack while exercising in her swimming pool. Earl--described in the press as Jordan's "housemate"--saved her by calling for emergency medical assistance and working to revive her. After the incident doctors, describing Jordan's medical condition, revealed that she had multiple sclerosis.

Jordan quickly recovered from the heart attack and resumed a vigorous schedule, determined to overcome her physical challenges. Even after being diagnosed with leukemia in 1994, she continued to teach and travel to speaking engagements. At last, however, she contracted pneumonia as a complication of the leukemia and died on January 17, 1996 in Austin.

Jordan had never publicly acknowledged her lesbianism, but friends described her as "straightforward about [it] in private." Both former Texas Governor Ann Richards and United States Representative Sheila Jackson Lee from Jordan's home district in Houston referred to Earl in their eulogies at Jordan's funeral. Earl herself maintained her long habit of public silence, declining the invitation of Jordan's sisters to sit with the family at the burial service in Austin.

In light of Jordan's strong record on civil rights for women and minorities and her reputation for forthrightness, her reticence on the topics of her own sexual orientation and of glbtq rights is something of an enigma. Gay reporter Juan Palomo of the *Austin American-Statesman* declared that "[i]f anybody had the luxury to say 'By golly, I'm a lesbian, and this is the woman I love,' it was Barbara Jordan. She could have done it, and her stature would not have been diminished one bit."

This statement may have been true at the end of her career, but certainly not at the beginning. In the

homophobic social climate of the early 1960s, an openly lesbian candidate would have stood scant chance of election. One of Jordan's political advisors recalled that campaign directors discouraged her from appearing with her companion at the time and that their relationship ended soon thereafter. To what extent this experience affected Jordan's future thinking and conduct is impossible to know.

The *Washington Post* once referred to Barbara Jordan as "the first black woman everything"--an accolade, but also a burden. She was a vocal and effective advocate for both African Americans and women, but was decidedly reluctant to become the icon or champion of the physically challenged. Although she supported legislation barring discrimination against people with disabilities, she once declared to Earl that she did not "want to become the poster child for the Multiple Sclerosis Society," and she hid the nature of her condition for years although curiosity about it was rampant.

She seems to have had a similar attitude with regard to her lesbianism, about which there was also widespread speculation. It is regrettable that Jordan never felt the freedom to declare her sexual orientation publicly or to raise her eloquent voice in support of her glbtq sisters and brothers.

Jordan is the subject of a play by Kristine Thatcher, *Voice of Good Hope*. First performed in 2000, it combines quotations from Jordan with invented dialogue in scenes depicting key moments in her life from childhood through her career to her final illness. The play does not delve into the exact nature of Jordan's relationship with Earl but portrays it as close and significant.

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