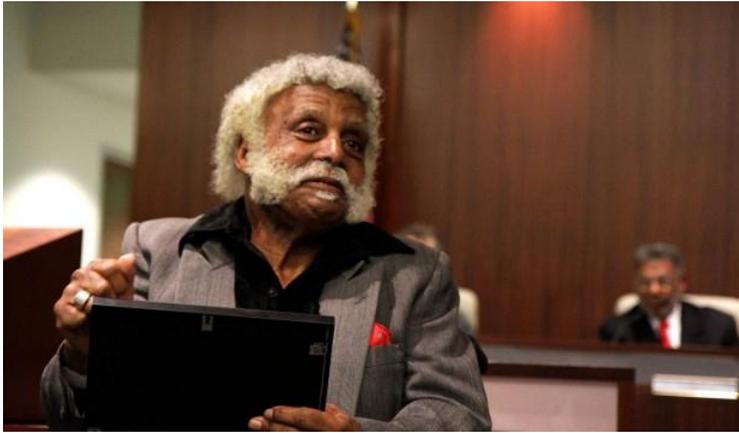


Richmond Confidential

Fred Jackson, North Richmond leader, dead at 73



Fred Jackson during a ceremony honoring him at City Hall in February. (photo by Robert Rogers)

By: [Robert Rogers](#) | September 8, 2011

At what would be one of his last public appearances, Fred Jackson's wheelchair was no burden to his trademark graciousness.

"But for the grace of God I can be here today. The service that I have given has come from God, and whatever I am I owe to all of you," Jackson said in late July, as he addressed about 200 people gathered in his beloved North Richmond for a music festival. His voice was thin and raspy from his continuing bout with cancer. "Thank you for allowing me to be of service."

Jackson died Thursday morning at the Vale Healthcare Center in San Pablo. He was 73.

Born Feb. 6, 1938 in rural Mississippi, Fred Davis Jackson came to the Richmond area with his family in 1950. Over the next 61 years, he would establish a reputation as one of the region's most consistent humanitarians and community leaders, amassing an innumerable collection of accolades and commendations along the way.

Jackson was a man of many sides. Devoutly religious, his faith-based activism was in the tradition of Civil Rights-era African American Christian leaders. His message was always laced with peace and love and, most of all, equality.

"Fred was an incredible coalition builder," said Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia in a telephone interview from Washington D.C., where he is attending a conference. "He could appeal to people across all lines, racial, religious, generational."

In recent years, Jackson had become something of a cause célèbre all himself. City, county and even federal leaders praised him and showered him with honors. Earlier this year, Gioia moved to have North Richmond's largest street was renamed "Fred Jackson Way" in honor of Jackson's lifetime of community service.

Jackson graduated from Richmond High School in 1957, the same school that youths in the deeply impoverished North Richmond attend today.

During an interview earlier this year, Jackson fondly recalled his early perspectives on North Richmond and how he was drawn to the nascent Civil Rights movement. At the time of the interview, Jackson was recuperating from chemotherapy sessions at a family member's home in San Pablo.

"There was a togetherness, a loving respect in the old days," Jackson said. "Life was hard, but folks looked out for each other, for each other's children. My community had a lot to do with raising me to be who I am."

Jackson served in the armed forces after high school, and picked up some German language skills while stationed in Europe. He met then-President John F. Kennedy in Berlin.

After returning home, Jackson worked for many years at Pacific Telephone. He devoted increasing time to community activism during the Lyndon B. Johnson administration, during which thousands of minority men and women ascended to leadership positions in community improvement projects and organizations.

Beginning in the 1960s, Jackson served stints as chairman of the county's Economic Opportunity Council, and on the boards of Richmond's Main Street Initiative and Arts and Culture Commission.

In the 1990s, Jackson worked with the Neighborhood House of North Richmond, the city's oldest African American-run social service agency.

At the same time, one of Jackson's most memorable roles was the one to which he seemed perfectly-suited. With his robust white beard and tender manner, Jackson every year donned the red suit and slid into his role as Santa Claus, doling out gifts and spending time with children at Verde Elementary School in North Richmond.

In February Jackson, still looking vigorous and cheerful despite his ongoing struggle with cancer, was honored by the city of Richmond with a 600-word proclamation for "exemplary service to the community."

Customarily, Jackson was self-effacing at the ceremony.

"Whatever I am, whatever I hope to be," Jackson said. "I owe it to my family. You drove me."

Jackson was also an artist, particularly in his later years. He wrote plays and songs and a book that was published earlier this year.

News of Jackson's death Thursday sparked an outpouring of praise and solemn odes from friends, family and community members on social media sites. The Richmond Police Department's Facebook page was among the dozens of Richmond residents and institutions that used the popular site to pay tribute.

"Our deepest sympathy in light of the passing of beloved community champion, Fred Jackson, who made the lives of Richmond residents better and brighter through his activism," read the post on Thursday. Residents and well-wishers quickly added condolences and memories to the thread.

In North Richmond, the mood was somber.

“I am just happy we had him for as long as we did,” said Kenneth Davis, a fellow North Richmond community activist who worked with Jackson over the years.

In Washington, D.C., Congressman George Miller (D-Martinez) entered remarks eulogizing Jackson into the Congressional record in May. The words quickly multiplied with re-posts on the web, particularly on social networking sites.

“(Jackson) spent his life making life better for others and he has called on us all to do the same. I invite my colleagues to stand with me and salute the work of a quiet man working tirelessly for justice and thank him for the change he has brought to our community,” Miller’s remarks read.

Gioia, who first met Jackson in the 1990s, said his favorite memory of his friend and partner was a little episode during a community cleanup day about 10 years ago.

“The television stations were there, and they were interviewing Fred,” Gioia said. “A bunch of children had been following him around that day, drawn to him. And so he was standing there giving an interview on the street, talking about how the youth were the future and how we had to work with them in cleaning and building our community.”

Gioia paused. He said he could still conjure up the visual.

“As he was talking there were all these kids behind him, energetic. It was this unforgettable scene. It was Fred at his best.”