

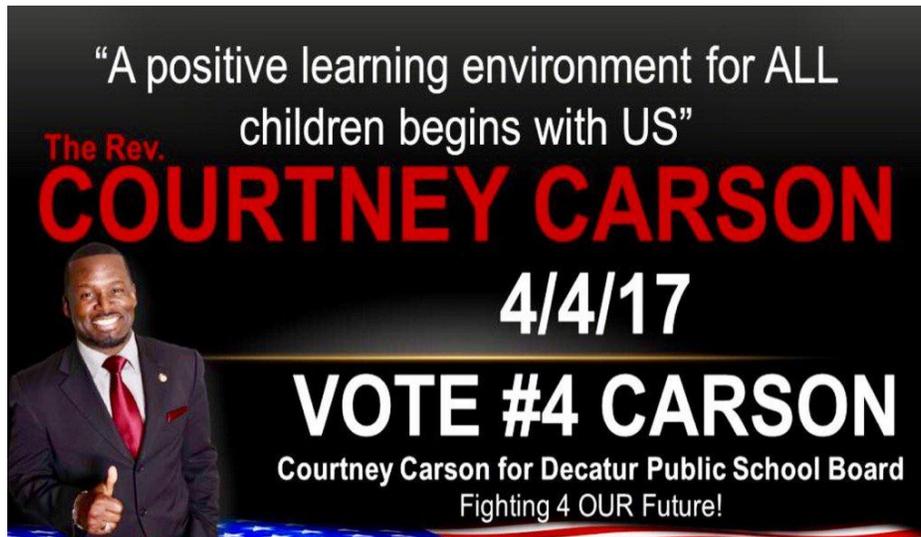


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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**A Celebration of Hope and Redemption**



**CHICAGO** – Rev. Jesse L. Jackson, Sr. has been arrested at sit-ins and demonstrations many times in his long crusade for racial, social and economic justice around the world. But his arrest 18 years ago in the small Illinois city of Decatur makes him especially proud.

On that November day in 1999 he was handcuffed and taken to jail as he passionately defended the potential and the futures of seven African American youth cast out and expelled for two years by the local school board for a 17-second melee in the stands of a high school football game.

“They were determined to throw those boys away,” Rev. Jackson says. “We salvaged them from being thrown away.”

Courtney Carson, one of the most troubled of the youth, puts it another way.

“Rev. Jackson,” he says, “saved my life.”

On Tuesday, Carson, now a 34-year-old Baptist minister in Decatur, was elected to the same public school board that expelled him and the six others in the name of “zero tolerance,” sparking a fierce national debate about the policy.

“It was a terrible policy,” Rev. Carson says. “God doesn’t practice zero tolerance.”

**On Saturday, April 8,** Rev. Carson will celebrate his election victory and redemption journey

with Rev. Jackson during the international broadcast of the **Rainbow PUSH Coalition's** weekly community forum at **10 a.m. at the coalition's national headquarters, 930 E. 50<sup>th</sup> Street in Chicago.**

"I'm coming to give Rev. Jackson a hug," Rev. Carson says. "A lot of people don't say thank you. I want to say thank you, but not just over the phone. I want to look that the man, who I admire so much, in the eye and say 'I love you and thank you so much, that God used you and you responded.'"

One reason Rev. Carson decided to run for a seat on the school board, he says, was because he saw what Rev. Jackson saw 18 years ago – a school system willing to throw away children.

"Education is the key to life," Rev. Carson says. "But too many of our children are seemingly on a death march, made to feel unloved and unwanted by the very institutions called to nurture, love and educate them."

After the broadcast, Rev. Carson will join Rev. Jackson for the sendoff from PUSH of a two-bus caravan, carrying more than 70 high school students on the 19<sup>th</sup> annual weeklong PUSH for Excellence tour of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

"Many of the kids on this bus tour will be visiting a college for the first time," Rev. Jackson says. "They will see what they've never seen and behold what they've never beheld and will come back changed people. People can change for the better or the worse, depending on the environment."

PUSH for Excellence is the educational arm of the Rainbow PUSH Coalition, which in addition to taking more than 1,200 students from financially challenged families on the tour, has, in the last 25 years, awarded more than \$6 million in scholarships to more than 2,100 students.

One of those students was a youth from Decatur named Courtney Carson. He used the scholarship money to enroll in Aurora University.

"I thank God for that scholarship," he says. "I didn't want to let Rev. Jackson down. I stayed up late every night to maintain my GPA. And I figured something out. I could learn. I'm smart." He may have been surprised at his academic skills, but he always knew he was street smart.

"I didn't grow up in the hood, I grew up in the jungle," Rev. Carson says. "A lot of stuff I was doing I was taught to do. Everybody praised the negative stuff I was doing. I would make an A plus in the streets."

He grew up surrounded by guns, drugs and poverty. Sometimes dinners consisted of sugar or ketchup sandwiches. His father was absent, his mother always working two jobs, waiting tables.

In the fall of 1999, when Rev. Carson was 17, he was at a high school football game. Walking through the stands he spotted a former friend turned gang rival. Words were exchanged and fists and feet started flying. The melee lasted 17 seconds.

The school board initially expelled the boys for two years. After negotiations and protests led by Rev. Jackson, their penalty was reduced to one year and they were also allowed to enroll in an alternative school.

He and Rev. Jackson stayed in touch. Rev. Jackson took the boys on a trip to Washington and the White House. "Every time we were with Rev. Jackson I felt an urge to do better, to do something

different with my life,” Rev. Carson says. “But we had to return to that environment. It was survival of the fittest in that environment.”

Rev. Carson only attended the alternative school for a few days before he got into trouble again. He was arrested on a gun charge. He got 90 days in jail. Behind bars he took the GED but failed. “Too much stress in jail,” he says.

When he was released, a woman named Karen Walker tutored him and he earned his GED. Years later, Walker was a member of his campaign for school board.

Today, Rev. Carson, a self-described “Jesus junkie,” is the associate pastor at Antioch Missionary Baptist Church. He also works for the Springfield Urban League Decatur Office, the Southside Improvement Association and mentors troubled youth like he used to be.

“He’s come full circle,” Rev. Jackson says. “Democracy and morality do not guarantee results. It guarantees opportunity. He had an opportunity and a new environment of acceptance.

“In the parable of the lost sheep,” Rev. Jackson adds, “Jesus’ point was the 99 could protect each other, but the one that is behind for whatever reason, he may have stepped in a hole, may have been bit by a wolf or a snake. If he had been left behind he would have been devoured. Character is made by how you treat the lost sheep. Courtney was one of the lost sheep. With tough love and embrace, I thought he could be redeemed and just look at him now.”

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**Rainbow PUSH Coalition** is a multi-racial, multi-issue, progressive, international organization that was formed in December 1996 by the Reverend Jesse L. Jackson, Sr. through merging of two organizations he founded Operation PUSH People United to Serve Humanity (estab. 1971) and the Rainbow Coalition (estab. 1984). With headquarters in Chicago and offices in Washington, D.C., Atlanta, Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, New York and Oakland, the organization works to make the American Dream a reality for all citizens while advocating for peace and justice around the world. RPC is dedicated to improving the lives of all people by serving as a voice for the voiceless. Its mission is to protect, defend and gain civil rights by leveling the economic and educational playing fields while promoting peace and justice around the world.

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Keep up with Rev. Jackson and the work of the Rainbow PUSH Coalition at [www.rainbowpush.org](http://www.rainbowpush.org).