

BARBARA JORDAN

Lesbian U.S. Congresswoman (1936-1996)



Barbara Jordan grew up in the historically black Fifth Ward of Houston, Texas. She attended segregated public schools, and an all-black college, where she graduated magna cum laude. She was first elected to the Texas legislature in 1966 and, from 1973 to 1979, served in the U.S. House of Representatives, the first black woman from a Southern state to do so. A gifted speaker, in 1974, she made an influential, televised speech before the House Judiciary Committee supporting the impeachment of President Richard Nixon. She also became the first African-American woman to deliver the keynote address at the Democratic National Convention – a speech that was ranked 5th in "Top 100 American Speeches of the 20th Century" and was considered by many historians to have been the best convention keynote speech in modern history. Suffering from Multiple Sclerosis, Jordan retired from politics in 1979 and became an adjunct professor teaching ethics at the University of Texas at Austin. Thanks to the strength of her oratory, she had earned a lasting reputation as a powerful force in American politics and, in 1990, was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame as one of the most influential women of the twentieth century. In 1992, she was again the keynote speaker at the Democratic National Convention at which she nominated President Bill Clinton. In 1994, she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Her health in decline, Barbara Jordan died on January 17, 1996. She was survived by her companion of 30 years, Nancy Earl – a relationship about which Jordan had remained circumspect to all but her closest associates during most of her career. On April 24, 2009 a statue was dedicated in her memory at the University of Texas.

Lesson Plan

Level 1: Contributions Approach

1. Activate prior experience: Have you studied about Congresswoman Barbara Jordan in your social studies textbook?
2. Read the biographical information.
3. Group Discussion: What key events contributed to Jordan's reputation as a notable congresswoman?
4. Extend knowledge: View more facts about Jordan at <http://womenshistory.about.com/od/congress/p/barbarajordan.htm>

Level 2: Additive Approach

1. How did Barbara Jordan electrify the Democratic Party in her speech in 1976? Click on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sKfJc37jjQ>
2. Examine another political inductee from The Legacy Project at <http://www.legacyprojectchicago.org/Politics>
3. Discuss both Jordan's and the inductee's values or beliefs in serving their country. Are there similarities or differences?

Level 3: Transformational Approach

1. How did population settlement patterns in the South during the Pre-Civil Rights era affect Jordan's educational opportunities?
2. Read the selection about Jordan by Mary Beth Rogers at <http://www.nytimes.com/books/first/r/rogers-jordan.html>
3. What were the influences that built Jordan's convictions to make the difference?

Level 4: Social Action Approach

1. Read to the Proceedings on the Impeachment of Richard Nixon that Barbara Jordan gave in 1974. The link is <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barbarajordan1992dnc.html>
2. Listen briefly to this excerpt at http://www.utexas.edu/lbj/barbarajordanforum/multimedia/Nixon_Impeachment_1974.avi
3. In your opinion, who else in preset times demonstrates Jordan's spirit of service, justice, and patriotism?