

The Clerk's Black History Series



Debra DeBerry
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Barbara Charline Jordan

(February 21, 1936 – January 17, 1996)

First African-American Woman elected to the Texas Senate after Reconstruction
First Southern African-American woman elected to the U.S. House of Representatives
First African-American Woman to give Keynote Address at a Democratic Convention

Barbara Charline Jordan was born on February 21, 1936 in Houston, Texas's Fourth Ward to Arlyne Patten and Benjamin Jordan. The youngest of three children, Barbara graduated with honors from Phillis Wheatley High School in 1952. After hearing a speech in high school by Edith Sampson, the first African-American U.S. Delegate appointed to the United Nations, Barbra was inspired to become a lawyer. Barbara majored in Political Science and History, graduating from Texas Southern University, an HBCU (Historically Black College or University) as a National Champion Debater, Delta Sigma Theta and *magna cum laude*, in 1956. She graduated from The University of Boston School of Law in 1959 and went on to teach political science at Tuskegee Institute, returning to Houston and passing the bar in 1960. That year, Barbara worked on the John F. Kennedy presidential campaign and eventually helped manage a highly organized get-out-the-vote program that served Houston's 40 African-American precincts.



After two unsuccessful campaigns, Barbara Jordan won a seat on the Texas Senate in 1966, becoming the first African-American state Senator since 1883 and the first African-American woman to do so. Re-elected to a full term in the Texas Senate in 1968, she served until 1972. She was the first African-American female to serve as president *pro tem* of the state senate and served one day, June 10, 1972, as acting governor of Texas. In 1972 Barbara Jordan was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, and with extensive support of the former President of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson, secured a position on the House



Judiciary Committee. Her powerful and influential televised speech before the House Judiciary Committee in 1974, during the impeachment hearings of President Richard Nixon, is known as one of the best speeches of the 20th century. But that impassioned speech could not compare to her inspirational and commanding speech at the 1976 Democratic National Convention. Her introduction was delayed as the crowd continued celebration and applause for nearly three minutes at her appearance. Despite not being a candidate, Barbara received one delegate vote for President at the Convention. Barbara retired from politics in 1979 and returned to teaching, this time at the University of Texas, Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs. She was invited back as a keynote speaker at the Democratic National Convention in 1992.

In August 1994, President Bill Clinton awarded Barbara Jordan the nation's highest civilian honor, the Medal of Freedom. She was honored alongside civil rights activist and former National President of the Delta Sigma Theta sorority, Dorothy Height. In a delightful coincidence, Height's signature appears on Barbara's Delta pledge certificate, dated 1953.

Despite her declining health she continued to teach and remained active in public service. Barbara Charline Jordan died of pneumonia at the age of 59 on January 17, 1996 and was survived by her partner of 30 years, Nancy Earl. Jordan was eulogized by President Clinton and former Texas Governor Ann Richards. On January 20, 1996, Barbara Jordan was buried at the Texas State Cemetery with her Presidential Medal of Freedom. She is believed to be the first African-American to be buried there.

