

Voices of PVA — E01 — Rodney Jordan on Joseph A. Jordan Jr.

[0:00] AL KOVACH JR.:

Welcome to Voices of pva. I'm your host, Al Kovach, and along with me is my co host, Chad Stewart.

[0:08] CHAD STEWART:

Welcome to the podcast, Everybody.

[0:10] AL KOVACH JR.:

For over 80 years, PVA has stood beside veterans with spinal cord injuries and diseases. And they've been fighting for their health care, their independence, their dignity, all the while advancing the rights and well being of all people with disabilities.

[0:26] CHAD STEWART:

We couldn't think of a more fitting story to share than one that is part of PVA's foundation. I first came across this story actually reading something Al wrote for PN magazine and it stuck with me. Al can tell it better than I can.

[0:39] AL KOVACH JR.:

Imagine fighting for your country, then coming home as a paralyzed veteran, unable to access your community. You can't enter your home, you can't hop on a public transit, and you can't even navigate your own community. Now imagine being told you're welcome, but only if you're white. That is essentially what happened in Richmond, Virginia. In 1947, paralyzed veterans of America was hosting its very first board meeting. The meeting concluded with the banquet at the Hotel John Marshall, where the delegates and other guests were expected to attend, including two black paralyzed veterans. However, the hotel told PVA those two black veterans would not be allowed inside. PVA refused to accept that. So Guilford Moss, PVA's first president, went to the media and challenged that hotel's decision. PVA's message was simple. Spinal cord injury knows no bias. PVA prevailed, the hotel reversed its decision, and the two black veterans were allowed to enter and sit alongside their fellow paralyzed veterans. One of those veterans was Joseph A. Jordan Jr. A World War II veteran who was paralyzed while serving in France in 1947. PVA made a choice to advocate for disabled veterans, all of them. And that raises a question I just couldn't get out of my mind when I discovered the story. What did that experience mean for Joseph? He saw PVA stand up for him. Was that the moment he realized organized advocacy could actually change the world around him? And did that experience influence the man he would eventually become? Joseph went on to become a lawyer, a judge, and a civil rights advocate. But his story isn't simply about discrimination he encountered. It's about what he did about it. To help us understand Joseph's legacy, we're joined by his nephew, Rodney Jordan. Rodney, like his uncle, has become a fixture of civil life in Norfolk. He served for more than a decade on the Norfolk school board, including as its chair. He also served as president of the Virginia School Boards association and sat on the board of Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority. Today he's the Chief Community Engagement officer at the McKinley Meganson Group. And I want to also mention that in 2020, Rodney

received the Benjamin Elijah Mays Lifetime Achievement Award for his work in education equity. Rodney, welcome to Voices of pva.

[2:52] RODNEY JORDAN:

Thank you for having me. Very honored to be here.

[2:55] AL KOVACH JR.:

So we want to get to know Joseph as a person, or as you might call him, Uncle Joseph. So can you please tell us what he was like before he was a lawyer, before he was a judge, before he was a civil rights advocate. I want our listen, our listeners to understand who Joseph was as a person.

[3:08] RODNEY JORDAN:

Yes, it's a fascinating question. Of course, he, he was and is much older than I am. But I can just tell you that as far as I can remember, you know, Uncle Joseph was always involved in trying to figure out ways of making sure that our country lived up to the ideals that are expressed in the founding documents in the Constitution. He actually wrote a book, We Can Make It Together. In the back of his book, he included the Constitution of the United States because he felt that strongly about the founding of the country, the role that African Americans played in that founding, and how important it was for African Americans in particular to provide leadership to this country in order for us to live up to those ideas. So he had lots of humor, that's for sure. Always had a, had a joke or something funny to say. I can tell you as a child, to be frank about it, I never really paid attention to the fact that, you know, obviously I knew he was in a wheelchair, but if anybody would have said that he had a disability, it never would have entered my mind. I felt like he did more, was involved in more, and somehow stood, if you will, for more than most people that I know who are considered to be able bodied or whatever the appropriate term is. But Uncle Joseph was about family. He was about looking out for his neighbor. He very much believed in the importance of, as he called it, participatory citizenship in our country. And those are just some of the things that come to mind when I reflect on, on him growing up around him and just so much that I continue to learn about him. Like this great story that you all are sharing today.

[4:53] AL KOVACH JR.:

And you know, I've got two little kids and being in a wheelchair myself, they're always wanting to sit on my lap and hear stories. And I'm wondering if you ever sat on his lap and he told you something that we'll never hear in any of the history books.

[5:05] RODNEY JORDAN:

Yeah, I, I definitely enjoyed sitting on his lap. Matter of Fact, we have his. His office that used to be his law office. Some years ago, I painted. Had a mural painted of him and family members on the. On the wall. And one of the pictures is when he was getting sworn in as a city council member. And it was Uncle Joseph in the wheelchair surrounded by a bunch of children and a very good friend of his, Ellis James, who, back during Uncle Joseph's city council campaign, walked Uncle Joseph through the white community, if you will, because you know how things

were back during Jim Crow. But Ellis James was fond of sharing that because Uncle Joseph was in the wheelchair, young children were at eye level with him. And so that's kind of how I remember it as a child, being eye level with him and being able to engage with him, and of course, always wanting to, you know, jump in his lap or jump in the. Jump in the wheelchair. But again, it never really kind of rested with me that he didn't have use of his legs, even though I knew that because he just seemed to get around and be mobile. And sometimes he would come and visit the house. He was the first person that I knew that had a phone in his car way back before the types of cell phones that we have today. And he would pull up in the driveway unknowingly and call us on the house phone. I would answer the phone and he would say, come to the window and look out in the driveway. And there. There he was in the car, in the. In the driveway. So that was the kind of humor that he. That he had. And just I think the way he related to. To young people all throughout his life.

[6:36] AL KOVACH JR.:

Some things don't change. I do that myself. So coming home from the war, Joseph was one of about 2,500 veterans who were paralyzed as a result of their injuries during World War II. But Joseph's story is somewhat unique in that he was a disabled black man returning to Virginia during the Jim Crow era. Furthermore, he was confined to a bed in a segregated ward in a hospital named after a Confederate soldier and a white supremacist.

[7:04] RODNEY JORDAN:

Wow. Bingo.

[7:05] AL KOVACH JR.:

Bunch of strikes against you. I can't imagine what that must have felt like. What did your uncle tell you about that experience? And what did it mean to navigate both life with a disability and life as a black veteran in a segregated society?

[7:18] RODNEY JORDAN:

Yeah, you know, it's pretty fascinating, you know, as you all shared the story that you had with me, and I just reflected on the story, plus was doing my own research. It was interesting. I came across a news article that was in the Norfolk Journaling Guide and one of the things that the reporter shared was that, you know, while Uncle Joseph was dealing with being paralyzed and his disability, the, the reporter noted that he was never bitter. And to me, that just was so reflective of all that I can recall. I don't ever remember Uncle Joseph ever say anything bitter about being paralyzed, ever being bitter about the war. But I do know that he abhorred segregation and felt that it was his duty and our duty to do all that was possible to up, uproot segregation. So that was a lifetime mission for him. And he often talked about why it was important that we break down, break down the barriers of segregation, why it was important that we literally have relationships with individuals, no matter their background or where they were from or whatever we considered to be able bodied, not able bodied, intellectually, whatever the case may be, we really should be about embracing one another and as family and as, and as community. Because in his words, because the country rests with the family and the community and that's what makes everything else possible. That's what makes government

work. He said that government was the family extended. And so all throughout his comments, all throughout his life, all throughout his writings, you will find central themes of family and community working together to make the country be what it is supposed to be for all that choose to, to live here.

[9:13] AL KOVACH JR.:

Thank you, Rodney. A great answer. That's, you know, I can't imagine what it was like to go to war, fight fascism over in Europe, only to come home to systemic racism. It's, I would expect better of us.

[9:24] RODNEY JORDAN:

You know, that's a, that's a running theme in the family. Not only did Uncle Joseph fight In World War II, he has a first cousin. My father has a first cousin who was a Tuskegee airman. Other members of the family fought in the war or involved in the, in the military. And again, all of this was central to what I think my grandparents instilled in them. The importance of if you feel that there's something needs to be done, then it's our responsibility to go and do something and make, make things better.

[9:55] AL KOVACH JR.:

And that brings us to our next topic. I want to talk about what exactly happened at the hotel John Marshall. So I think your uncle was probably still a patient at the Richmond VA in 1947. PVA refused to accept that the hotel John Marshall wanted to exclude your uncle and another black paralyzed veteran from the PVA gathering. It was like a banquet at the end of the PVA board meeting. And you know, PVA stood up and challenged the hotel's position and Ultimately, those two veterans were allowed to join their fellow PVA members. So did Joseph ever talk about the experience, that particular experience? And do you have any. A sense of what it. What it meant to him to see an entire, you know, the entire PVA stand up for him?

[10:40] RODNEY JORDAN:

Yeah, you know, I don't recall him mentioning experience. There's one remaining sibling, my Aunt Fanny. I reached out to her and asked her if she recalled it, and her response to me was she didn't recall him speaking to that particular incident. And then she went on to say that Uncle Joseph was so much of an optimist and was just so busy, focused on the possibilities of today and tomorrow, that he did not share much on these negative experiences that he encountered. Now, I can tell you that as I got older, when he was. When he was a judge, he converted, became a judge. He converted his law office into a family convenience store and gas station. So I would work there junior high and high school, and he would leave the bench, come from the courthouse, come into the office, would go up into his office, and I would always go in there and pepper him with questions. So I always had questions and would write him letters, and it would often ask him about these experiences that. That he had. And that's where I know about his. His feelings about the Constitution, his feelings about segregation, his feelings about the importance of African Americans in particular, because part of his philosophy was that those who have suffered the most here are especially equipped in order to lead the country, to lead, to live up to the ideals that it has expressed. And so he would often share stories about. About segregation,

about his work around the poll tax, about the reason why he would take certain positions in the. In the media that I did not understand but would often pepper him about. So those are the types of stories that. That he would share with me and I think, share with the other family members as they would pepper him with questions or inquire why in the world he was doing what he was doing. One other thing I'll share. I mentioned the importance of family. Where I grew up. My. My father. My father was the youngest brother and my Aunt Anna was the oldest sister. And we grew up living next door to each other. The families lived next door to each other, so our homes became the family site for family cookouts and picnics. And so my brother and I often share stories about how my Uncle Joseph, my father, all of our uncles, would get together in the backyard and would just be going at each other and our family. I guess it was like always being in the courtroom so my father would always say to Uncle Joseph, you know, what crazy idea had you come up with this time? And then Uncle Joseph would, would explain it. Then everybody would go in to tear it all apart. But then once they decided to do something, they were all together and went forward with it. So that's something that I valued then, and it's something that I value today and wish even in today's political times we could find ways of engaging in a type of effective debate and then making a decision about what's best for our country and then come together and work together to make. To make that happen.

[13:54] AL KOVACH JR.:

I imagine your Uncle Joseph had a holster at his side with the. The gavel, ready to break up family disputes. That would be funny. So I do want to talk to you a little bit about, more about how your Uncle Joseph became an advocate when you know at some point you're just not going to take paralysis sitting down, as they say, and enough is enough, and you got to speak up. So at some point, Joseph went from experiencing discrimination himself to actively fighting against discrimination of others. I also, I think it's important to point out that as an attorney, your uncle not only took. Took on the voting rights cases to abolish the poll taxes, as you said in Virginia, but he also actively fought for wheelchair accessibility in public buildings long before the Americans with Disabilities act ever was passed. So what do you think transformed his personal experiences into a larger commitment to advocacy?

[14:46] RODNEY JORDAN:

Yeah, I think it's a combination of things. Number one, I mentioned earlier in letters that he has written and wrote, in one letter in particular that he wrote to my brother, in me, he espoused that this cause, this cause for justice, this cause for a great country for us to live in, really was rooted in, in the family, that this is what his father, who also was named Joseph, expressed in the family. This is what my grandmother, whose name was Agnes, expressed in the family. So in the family itself, this cause, this mission, this purpose was rooted, rooted in whatever it is that they talked about at the kitchen table, in life, in church. Those. Those principles were rooted. What I found even more illuminating to me and exciting to me as I read the article that you wrote and, and have just had opportunity to think more about this. As you mentioned, there's the combination of fighting for justice on behalf of African Americans, women, and others who were legally denied opportunity. And then I think I'm going to count it as a double blessing, not only being African American, but also being a paralyzed American and maybe even a trifecta of also being a Veteran. That to me is like a perfect coming together of Uncle Joseph being able to fight

for justice and fairness and inclusion on, on, on multiple, multiple fronts. I can remember I mentioned that we, Uncle Joseph converted his law office into a convenience store, gas station. And I can remember when that was being set up and I wrote with him one day to a local department store and he was going to buy a mini refrigerator. And I can remember we were going through the parking lot and he was trying to find a parking space close to the store and he couldn't find a parking place close to the store. And while he was driving around, I remember seeing somebody walk out the store who was very able bodied, got in his car in one of the close up parking spaces. And that experience kind of has stuck to me to this day. And so his commitment to access for disabled Americans, as you mentioned, I think about it every day. I think about the, the, some of the different public accommodation cases that he and his law partners took on, both from the perspective of African American access, but also disability accommodations. And I have heard that even today in Norfolk City hall, the reason that there are accommodations and have been accommodations there for going back 50, 60 years now was because of demands that Uncle Joseph made in order to be able to have access not only in City hall, but for that matter also access in the courtroom.

[17:42] AL KOVACH JR.:

So that must have been amazing. I'm thinking that he passed away in 91.

[17:48] RODNEY JORDAN:

1991. Correct.

[17:49] AL KOVACH JR.:

And that would be shortly after the Americans with Disabilities act was passed. So it must have been a somewhat a sense of accomplishment, you know, mission accomplished, as they say.

[17:58] RODNEY JORDAN:

Yeah, Uncle Joseph definitely worked on advocacy for the Disability Act, I can remember, and I've read letters that he has sent that he would send locally to Richmond, which is our state capitol in Virginia, to us, to Congress advocating for access and disability rights for that matter. Not only did he do that, also mental health was a very important issue to him as well. But clearly making sure that individuals who had disabilities could have full access to, to public accommodations, private accommodations, and just being able to be able to live fully as any other American was definitely central to his fight for cause and injustice.

[18:45] AL KOVACH JR.:

And I want to talk a little bit more about that. He could have been your Uncle Joseph could have been just that guy that handcuffs himself to the chain link fence or goes to the press to complain about inaccessibility, but he didn't. He chose the law. And I'm wondering why do you think he chose the law? And how did his experience as a black paralyzed veteran influence the Kind of lawyer and advocate that he became.

[19:05] RODNEY JORDAN:

Well, we mentioned earlier about segregation, also mentioned about his father, Joseph, Joseph Sr. So what Uncle Joseph believed was that as he was encountering Jim Crow law, it was Jim Crow law. It was a law, it was the legal profession. It was the law that was being used to deny so many citizens the opportunity to participate fully. And so he pursued law for the purpose of being able to change those practices, to change those laws, to open up opportunity. And so I think that was part of what was driving him to be become an attorney. He actually went to school for labor law. But I think his drive in dealing with Jim Crow experiences, like you mentioned, it happened in 1947. Just the discrimination that he would encounter every day in life. And then I've read where even once he became a lawyer, very early on, he could not. He had, you know, there were steps in order to get to. Into the office or get to the movie theater or get to places that he wanted to go. And I read where. Where he would pull up young men in the community who knew him, who were determined to help him get to where he needed to go because of the causes he was fighting. They would help him out the car and they would literally pick him up and carry him up the stairs to wherever he needed to go in order to gain access to what was, what was important to him. And so I think all those, all those things together just drove him both from a legal profession. But I also will tell you, you. You were joking about, you know, being chained to the fence and other things. He did those things too, there. Yeah, there I have photographs of him. Back during the 60s, Norfolk was being recognized as an all American city. And there's a picture of him in his wheelchair holding up a sign. And the sign says, an all American city does not discriminate, does not segregate. And so he, he ran the gamut from what he was doing both in his wheelchair from a physical standpoint and what he was doing with his brain power on a. On a legal stand for it sounds

[21:15] AL KOVACH JR.:

like what most people call a career. He weaponized it. Can you imagine if social media existed back then?

[21:20] RODNEY JORDAN:

Oh, I, I think about that often.

[21:23] AL KOVACH JR.:

Talk about a firebrand. So I want to talk a little bit about the connection that your Uncle Joseph had with PVA's mission. PVA was founded by a band of veterans who came home From World War II with spinal cord injuries. These wounded heroes, I guess you could call them, made a decision not to just live, but to live with dignity. And they wanted to Contribute to society. When they created pva, they established an organization that advocated for quality health care, research and education, veterans benefits, as well as civil rights and accessibility. When you look at Uncle Joseph's life alongside PVA's history, what connection do you see?

[22:00] RODNEY JORDAN:

Well, as I mentioned earlier, Uncle Joseph wrote a book in 1984. I think it came out in 1986. It was called We Can Make It Together. The full title is We Can Make It Together, A Daring Vision for the Future for Black Americans. But it really to me applies universally. So as you were citing the PVA mission, if you don't mind, I'm just going to read some of the chapters in, in the, in the

book from the table of contents. So there's a chapter on religion, the family, National Service, the Council of Wisdom and Experience, Education, Government, the criminal justice System, National Compassion, Economics, the Challenge. And then as I mentioned, the appendices include the Constitution of the United States. So where I hear you read the the Mission of PVA and when I read and reread and consider the chapters in Uncle Joseph's book and the content of that book, it seems to me that there is a theme that maybe started in, in 1947 or if not sooner, and then run all the way through 1991, as far as I'm concerned, still runs in his life today. I'm literally talking to you from his house in North Virginia that has an elevator in it and is one of the few places that I know of, at least around 1950s when, when the house was built that is handicap accessible. And so where so much now is about accessibility and to just be sitting in this room and seeing the wide doors and the elevator and the how the sink is positioned and so much more. Just for me it just seemed like it was normal. But it is so interesting how much fight and commitment and passion organizations like PVA and individuals like Uncle Joseph and others had to work so hard to make become what my generation gets to consider as normal.

[24:07] AL KOVACH JR.:

You know, you bring up a good point that was one of PDA's first major legislative successes was going to Capitol Hill and getting Congress to approve a VA grant for accessible housing for our veterans coming home from over to. Great point. So let's talk about the legacy of your uncle. What would Joseph, if he was sitting in here with us right now, what do you think he would tell veterans and advocates? You know, what should they understand?

[24:34] RODNEY JORDAN:

I think he would say registered to vote. If you're on this on the sidelines, you are in the wrong place. You need to be in on the field of action. I think he would encourage an understanding, as I mentioned earlier, that government is an extension of us as individuals to families, to community and that the families and the community need to be the ones who are setting the direction for the country. And it's the job of our elected officials to help carry out the values that the family and the community has, has, has expressed. I think he would be rightfully upset about what's happening around voting rights and efforts to limit access to the ballot after he and so many others work so hard to guarantee right to the, to the ballot. But in the, at the core of it, Uncle Joseph is not going to be one to, to complain. He's going to be one to say go to work. If I could, if I can quote something that I recall him writing once before, he said we need less decibelism and a lot more let's do ism. And so that, that to me is what he would be saying. Let's, let's get off the sidelines and just talk about what somebody else has done or has not done. Let's roll up our sleeves and join together and be about some let's do ism to ensure that we live up to the beliefs and values that we say that we have as a, as a country.

[26:04] AL KOVACH JR.:

Rhonda, you've, you've helped us see your Uncle Joseph as more than just a name in PVA's history. He felt to see him as a nephew's uncle, a veteran, a paraplegic, a lawyer, a judge, and even an advocate. But I want to end where we began, which was at that hotel in Richmond. Two black paralyzed veterans were told they were not allowed to enter the hotel to join their PVA members for a gathering. But PVA stood up and said, spinal cord injury knows no bias. Joseph

went on to spend much of his life challenging all kinds of bias. And perhaps that's the larger lesson of this story. An organization stood up for two veterans. Those two veterans were able to roll through the door and one of them went on to spend the rest of his life opening doors for others. Rodney Jordan, thank you so much for joining us for our first episode of Voices of PVA and for helping us understand the man behind this remarkable story. And Chad, thanks for being here as my co host for our very first episode. Thanks Al.

[27:05] CHAD STEWART:

It has been a great conversation and I think Joseph's story is a powerful reminder of why advocacy has always been at the heart of pva.

[27:13] AL KOVACH JR.:

Subscribe to Voices of PVA wherever you get your podcasts so you never miss an episode. If you have a minute, leave us a review. It really helps more people find the show. I'm Al Kovach Jr. And this has been Voices of PVA. Thanks for listening.