

Dr. Benjamin Mays

When you compile a list of overcomers, you have to include Dr. Benjamin E. Mays. His life is a testimony to not quitting when the odds from outside and within your world are against you. Born in poverty, he rose to the prominent position of President of Morehouse College in Atlanta, GA and the first black President of the Atlanta School Board. His father tried to discourage him from seeking a higher education but eventually this Phi Beta Kappa recipient and Valedictorian succeeded and became a mentor to many civil rights leaders in the Twentieth Century.

Benjamin Mays was born in 1894 in Epworth, South Carolina on an isolated cotton farm. In those days, black children could only attend school November to February each year. He spent the rest of his time picking cotton. He wanted an education, though. He would cry when bad weather prevented him from attending school. Thanks to his older sister, Susie, he could read and write when he first went to school at the age of 6. When he told his father that he intended to get a higher education he was met with disdain and anger. Education made men both liars and fools, his father felt. Eventually, he overcame his father's objections and enrolled in the High School at South Carolina State College in Orangeburg, where he graduated as Valedictorian in 1916.

His father's feelings weren't the only obstacles he faced. Racial prejudice and mob violence were common occurrences in his childhood. He remembered an angry group of white men with guns accosting his father for not showing proper respect. He knew to become an educated black man he would have to leave the South. He applied to Bates College in Maine and was accepted. He worked summers as a Pullman Porter on the railroad. At Bates, where he was one of only a handful of black students, Mays was surprised and heartened to find himself treated as an equal for the very first time.

After graduating with honors he attended the University of Chicago and was invited to teach mathematics at Morehouse College in Atlanta. He eventually returned to Chicago to receive his Master's degree and went on to serve in several institutions as a leader, including the state College in South Carolina, the Urban League and the YMCA. He was appointed dean of the School of Religion at Howard University where he helped it attain a Class A rating from the American Association of Theological Schools. In 1940, he was named President of Morehouse College, where he worked to make it one of the best learning institutions in the nation for twenty-seven years. While there he was a major influence on future civil rights activities such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Julian Bond and Andrew Young.

The writer, Prial remembered Mays in a New York Times obituary as "a voice of moderation in the critical years of the civil rights movement. He attacked white liberals who paid only lip service to racial equality, but he [also] criticized ... black extremists" for undermining attempts at unity between races. After retiring from Morehouse, Mays served as an advisor and leader to several civic, religious and

educational groups. In 1969, he became a member of the Atlanta School Board and became the first black President. He retired in 1981, leaving a lasting legacy of books on his upbringing and struggles, dozens of scholarly articles on racial, educational, and religious issues, speeches at more than 200 universities and colleges, and some 45 honorary degrees. His life was one of overcoming prejudice, social conventions and ignorance.

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