

In memory of a social work giant: Dr. Morris F.X. Jeff, Jr.

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cjohnson28@tulane.edu



Dr. Morris F.X. Jeff Jr., Tulane School of Social Work's first Black PhD graduate

Every so often there comes a person that will be instrumental in setting a path of change and transformation in the wrinkles of history. Sometimes a change agent is manifested into reality whose name is echoed and revered through space and time. Morris F.X. Jeff Jr., PhD, MSW, was such a change agent. He impacted not only the field of social work around the world but never hesitated from the relationships and people who venerate him today.

As I was speaking to Melissa Smith Haley, 14th President of NABSW, her Southern honeyed voice went up an octave in pride, "Dr. Jeff also married me and my husband. He had known me and my husband since we were kids. He was a great orator. One time he called me on the phone and I was asleep. I thought it was God calling me," she said, laughing over the phone.

Dr. Jeff Jr. was a larger-than-life presence, although he came from humble but abundant beginnings. (An oxymoronic statement, but Dr. Jeff saw the richness of New Orleans' culture.) Dr. Jeff Jr was born in 1938 in New Orleans. He stayed at the Magnolia Housing Projects during development for a short period of time. This, along with his influence from his father, might've been where Dr. Jeff Jr. became motivated about the liberation of Black people.

Dr. Jeff Jr. received his master's degree in social work from Atlanta University in 1963 and was the first African American recipient of a doctoral degree from Tulane School of Social Work. Dr. Jeff Jr operated in the spirit of excellence by becoming the 5th President of the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW), where he was instrumental in changing how we look at Black social work and activism.

Dr. Jeff brought his Pan-Africanist beliefs to NABSW, developing the Harambee Closing Ceremony for the 1981 annual conference in honor of our African culture and our brothers and sisters throughout the African Diaspora. In 1993, this closing ceremony was renamed the Morris F.X. Jeff Harambee Ceremony to honor his legacy to NABSW. In 1998, he was enstooled as Sankofahene (Chief) Barima Odi Akosah in Ghana, West Africa.

In 2003, Dr. Jeff Jr. was welcomed into the ancestral realm. Dr. Jeff is survived by his beloved wife, Florence Calvin Jeff, father of Dean Jeff, Byron Jeff, and Janine Jeff Baah, a plethora of grandchildren, family, friends, and numerous Black social workers who are striving to create change like the ancestor Dr. Jeff Jr.

As a Black social worker, I understand that we stand on the shoulders of giants. We sit in the hands of excellence. We shall continue to bask in the memory of Dr. Morris Francis Xavier Jeff, Jr. and keep his legacy alive.

Chelsea T. Johnson is an Advanced Standing Master of Social Work (MSW) student and a member of Tulane's chapter of the National Association of Black Social Workers.

