

R.I.P. Reverend Jesse Jackson, Civil Rights Leader and Presidential Candidate

He died at 84 from progressive supranuclear palsy, or PSP.

February 20, 2026 By Eva Lorenz

U.S. civil rights leader, politician and ordained Baptist minister, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, died February 17, at age 84. He was known for his close allyship with the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., running twice for U.S. president and founding the Rainbow PUSH Coalition, a civil rights organization. His death shines a light on his legacy as well as the neurodegenerative disease progressive supranuclear palsy, or PSP, with which he was diagnosed in 2025.

“Over the past 40 years, he has played a pivotal role in virtually every movement for empowerment, peace, civil rights, gender equality and economic and social justice,” [reads his Rainbow PUSH Coalition biography](#).

Jackson was born in Greenville, South Carolina, in 1941 and grew up in the [South](#), where his childhood was shaped by segregation and Jim Crow laws. In 1959, he escaped Jim Crow rule when he enrolled at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign on a football scholarship, but he still faced discrimination and prejudice. After transferring and graduating from what is now North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, he studied ministry at the [Chicago](#) Theological Seminary.

Throughout college and afterward, he made a name for himself via his conviction and outspokenness and led various boycotts and [protests](#). Before even graduating from seminary school, he became the youngest staff member at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, where he worked closely with Dr. King. In 1968, he was among those who rushed to the balcony in Memphis where Dr. King was shot.

The next decades of Jackson’s life were defined by the civil rights movement and [politics](#). In 1971, he founded Operation PUSH, a civil rights organization in Chicago that evolved into today’s Rainbow Push Coalition. He ran for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1984 and 1988. In

1993, he was arrested at a protest against the Clinton administration's policy of maintaining a detention camp for Haitian political [refugees](#) who were [HIV](#) positive. In 2000, he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom for his efforts in negotiating the 1999 release of three U.S. soldiers held in Yugoslavia.

In recent years, Jackson dealt with various health setbacks. Last November, Jackson was hospitalized for treatment for severe PSP. [According to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke](#), PSP is caused by damage to nerve cells in areas of the brain and brain stem associated with thinking and body movements.

PSP affects balance, walking, swallowing, speech and eye movements as well as mood and behavior. Because of its physical symptoms, PSP is often mistaken for [Parkinson's disease](#). This was the case for Jackson, who in 2017 publicized a Parkinson's diagnosis. Rainbow PUSH Coalition later corrected the diagnosis to PSP. The symptoms typically present when an individual is in their 60s.

The exact cause of PSP is unknown, and in most cases no genetic factor is identified. Researchers think the cellular damage that leads to PSP may be caused by random genetic changes or exposure to unknown chemicals.

"Reverend Jackson is survived by his wife, Jacqueline; their children—Santita, Jesse Jr., Jonathan, Yusef, Jacqueline; daughter Ashley Jackson and grandchildren. He was preceded in death by his mother, Helen Burns Jackson; father, Noah Louis Robinson; and stepfather, Charles Henry Jackson," reads [the Jackson family statement on Jackson's death](#).