

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Jordan parlayed first job into national acclaim

Tracy Conrad
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"The young man returned in 1961 to find that most of his dreams had to be deferred. Diploma in hand he couldn't get a job..." The Desert Sun covered the 50th reunion of Palm Springs High School's Class of 1956 on June 12th, 1987, and the event's main speaker, Charlie Jordan.



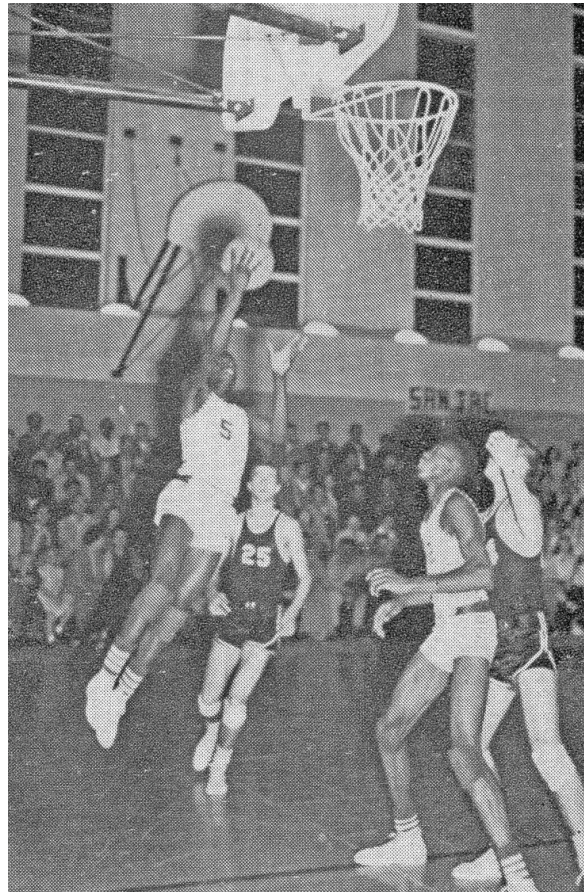
Jordan

Jordan had been a star basketball player in high school. The 6-foot 7-inch teen led the team to victory in what the yearbook recorded as the most outstanding athletic season of the school's history. He dominated in the county-wide league and received full scholarship offers from multiple colleges including UCLA and USC. The scout from Gonzaga University went first to his mother to ask for her blessing and assure her they would take good care of her son. That respect shown his mother counted for a lot.

At the reunion, Jordan addressed his class and recounted the start of his illustrious career. "He thanked Mayor Frank Bogert...for giving him a chance through a job as recreation supervisor."

Fellow classmate and highly-lauded Los Angeles Times reporter Ken Reich recalled the speech, "At the reunion, the main speaker was Charles Jordan...When he was a basketball star at Palm Springs High in my senior year, he hardly ever spoke at all. He was a shy, lanky black youngster who got a basketball scholarship at Gonzaga University, where he got an excellent education. When he returned to Palm Springs, it was then-Mayor Frank Bogert who gave him a job as a recreation supervisor. Jordan said he had suggested to Bogert at the time, 1961, that he might not be accepted by whites in that position. Bogert had been adamant about going ahead with the job offer, and it was the beginning of a brilliant career for Jordan."

Both Bogert and Jordan had some trepidation. They wondered out loud about the public's reaction. When asked years later about his reception, Jordan said he was easily accepted, it had been "harmonious," the worry had been for naught. He noted that Palm Springs



Charlie Jordan scores against Banning to break RCL (Riverside County League) record with 47 points. COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

schools and movie theaters were integrated despite the prevailing practice of segregation in the rest of the country. "It was sort of strange; it was half and half there. But it was rich, I wouldn't have changed it for anything."

Jordan was promoted from this first job, eventually becoming assistant to the city manager. In that capacity he was instrumental in getting the first affordable housing project in Palm Springs completed on ten acres at 2607 S. Linden Way, called Seminole Gardens. That development housed many people who had relocated from Section 14.

Jordan was familiar with Section 14. He and his family originally lived on the Indian Reservation in the middle of Palm Springs. He described the conditions for an interview in 2002, "Well, there was no grass, of course, and most of us had centralized facilities, in the middle of the reservation at certain places there were showers and bathrooms and washing areas that we would go to and I mean just all sand...And we all lived on the reservation surrounded by desert, just as far as the eye could see, mountains and desert."

It was there, on the reservation, Jordan started playing basketball. "There was a Boys Club in the middle of the desert that I would go to and (there was a gentleman there) I'll never forget him as long as I live. I don't know whether he was properly trained to be a Boys Club director or not, that wasn't important...when I became a director I realized the importance of caring, the kids don't care how much you know they just want know how much you care."

Mentored by the Boys Club, he developed a very strong work ethic. Jordan's aunt also set an excellent example. She owned a house on Section 14. "She was very enterprising, she got a large house, I mean it had about six rooms and so she

started renting out the rooms to people coming through there, blacks and whites. She didn't care...it just didn't make any difference to her...we all lived in the same house, used the same kitchen, same bathroom and the house was always full...then she bought some more little homes, she was very enterprising...it also added to the closeness of that community and she made us work. I worked every, every day but Sunday."

Jordan went off to college and his family moved from Section 14 to Banning. Jordan recalled many families were vacating, "The land became so valuable in Palm Springs. It was Indian land now. And then there were some unscrupulous people of course, and they just wanted to take the Indian land and so they gave us notice to get out of there...matter of fact they were telling the Indians to get off."

They "cleaned off the reservation and started building condos. You know how that goes. It was a classic case of urban removal and the Indians had to move too until a gentleman by the name of Tunney, his father was a professional boxer, heavyweight champion I think, but he was, a senator--congressman and he came down to see what was going on and he realized what they had done to the Indians and so many judges and lawyers were disbarred, I mean they had taken their land and he gave it all back to the Indians. And boy, the Indians, they took it with a vengeance too, and they took their land back but we had relocated (by) then."

When Jordan returned from college, he thought his only job prospect was working at the car wash, despite his advanced degree. Given the chance to work in recreation, he recalled how important the Boys Club had been to him. He would parlay that first job into a career in government that brought him national recognition and acclaim.

Jordan "was the first person of color to ever work in that city and...that's how I started building my career in recreation." He spent a decade working for Palm Springs, he described his duties, "to work with the Little League, make sure the lights were on at the stadium, help organize Little League. Help organize the basketball. Go around check on the chess games and the dances; Sonny and Cher, I used to hire them a lot. During the Easter time Palm Springs was wall-to-wall kids, college kids...so I used to be in charge of all of that;" his hard work interrupted only by a two-year tour of duty in the Army. He also did graduate work at Loma Linda University and at the University of Southern California.

He reluctantly left the desert when opportunity knocked. Jordan would go on to be elected to office in Portland, Oregon; work with Lady Bird Johnson in Austin, Texas; be appointed by Ronald Reagan to a presidential commission.

When asked about the political climate in Palm Springs during the height of the Civil Rights Movement, Jordan gently laughed, "Oh it passed Palm Springs by... unemployment was probably at zero. Palms Springs people just work...my last two years as assistant to the city manager, the students started acting up at the high school... there was some tension there...but nothing really blew out of proportion in Palm Springs..." The interviewer in 2002 noted that at the time the Civil Rights Movement was really hot around the country. Jordan smiled and replied, "Oh yeah, it was hot around the country, everywhere but Palm Springs."

Tracy Conrad is president of the Palm Springs Historical Society. The Thanks for the Memories column appears Sundays in The Desert Sun. Write to her at pshstracy@gmail.com.

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