Esau Jenkins

This activity is geared to achieve the following objectives:

- Learn about the credit union heroes who shaped the industry.
- Connect the personal and professional motives of these heroes to your own credit union career.
- Share what you learn about your credit union hero with the large group in a 2-3 minute presentation.

When sharing this story, your table group is encouraged to reflect on the following:

1. Who was this person, and what were their key achievements in credit unions?
2. What motivated them to action?
3. What's their superpower?
4. How does this Hero's story connect to the larger credit union purpose of helping the financial fortunes of poor and working people?



ESAU JENKINS

KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- A lifelong entrepreneur. Operated a bus service to transport workers from Johns Island to Charleston, one of many successful business ventures Jenkins was involved in.
- Helped establish Haut Gap High School on Johns Island (today it is an advance studies magnet school).
- Created the Citizens Committee of Charleston, which was dedicated to the economic, cultural, and political improvement of local African-Americans.
- Founded C.O. Federal Credit Union in 1966. Jenkins saw the credit union as a vehicle for empowering the African American community economically.
- In addition to the credit union, Jenkins was earlier involved with the formation of the Progressive Club, a cooperative project that would go on to educate members who were seeking to register to vote.

- Chartered the Sea Island Comprehensive Health Care Corporation, provider of low-income housing, a nursing home and a comprehensive health care center for Sea Island residents.

PERSONAL STORY #1

Jenkins and his wife operated a fleet of buses that transported workers from Sea Islands to Charleston, South Carolina. Johns Island is one of the Sea Islands, home to the unique Gullah people who had retained much of their African cultural heritage. During the ride, they would teach literacy to the passengers for the purposes of helping the riders overcome the state's discriminatory literacy test to become registered voters. In 1948, Jenkins started the Progressive Club, a co-op minded project. Housed within the co-op were a community grocery store, gas station, day care, classroom space, and community market that allowed residents to trade goods and services and help each other in times of need.

PERSONAL STORY #2

In 1954, Jenkins attended Highlander, a training center for labor organizers and black and white civil rights workers. When asked to identify the immediate problem in his locality, Jenkins was quick to point to the lack of adult education. Jenkins' vision was to create a series of schools to provide education to adults so that African Americans could pass the literacy test and register to vote. Joining Jenkins in this endeavor were Bernice Robinson and Septima Clark, often called the "queen mother" of the civil rights movement. The three worked to create the first citizen school on Wadmalaw Island in 1957. The school featured little books that tried to associate words with what you might do. Many people, at that time and in these locations, could not even identify letters.

INTERESTING TIDBITS

- The Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture features the Esau Jenkins story in the permanent exhibit titled, "Defining Freedom, Defending Freedom: The era of segregation."
- Citizen schools were so successful, they became the model for other schools throughout the south. This system of education helped over 2 million African-Americans to become registered voters by 1970. Fortunately, literacy tests, which were common in the South in the Jim Crow era, were outlawed in 1965 with the passage of the Voting Rights Act.

NOTES: