

## A Man Called Jim

Written by Nancy Henderson-James

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The buzz of dedication and excitement couldn't be missed at the house on Watts Street in Durham, a staging area for Barack Obama's campaign on election day, 2008. Dozens of mostly white folks on the front walk approached the house and left the house. The hall was congested, making it difficult to sign the register. Volunteers occupied all chairs and sofas in the living room, and some sat on the floor and leaned against the windows, waiting for their marching orders. Three or four women sat around the dining room table with lists of people to call. More people entered data in computers. Others assembled canvassing packets. Organizers took groups of volunteers, in the living room and in ad hoc clusters on the wraparound porch, through the packets, telling them how to approach voters, what to leave for them, and how to code the lists.

Election day was miserably rainy and the rain only seemed to increase through the day. By late afternoon my raincoat no longer kept me dry. The umbrella didn't succeed in protecting the lists of addresses and brochures my companion and I juggled in repeated forays from car to street to car. But the drive to contact everyone on our lists and the reception we received in the poor African American neighborhoods made it worthwhile. One woman, who must have been in her seventies, proudly announced that she had just voted for the first time. A man visiting his sister said he had already voted, but would make sure to carry his sister to the polls. A young man came to the door bare-chested and said that his mother had e-mailed to tell him to vote. He vowed he was on his way. Another young man was getting in his car to give his friends rides to the polls. In the driveway of one house, a Verizon repairman told me he was so excited that he hadn't slept Monday night and was sure he wouldn't sleep that night either. Durham, and the whole world it seemed, was enthralled with this election.

Several weeks later, the itinerant yardman with whom I am working on literacy skills met me at the library. I'll call him Jim. I had printed from the Internet an easy-to-read short biography of Barack Obama. I was sure that Jim would want to know something about our soon-to-be first African American president. I was stunned when he said he really wasn't interested. "He don't really have no relevance to my life," he said. "Nothing will change for me." I started to contradict him, but in fact I could see his point. Obama's election would not change the circumstances of this man's life. He would still have to hunt for work every day and struggle to pay the bills. But I really wanted him to be as excited as I was. I wished he could see that a president can affect individual lives.

The example that came to mind was the way President Bush responded to 9/11 by going to war with Iraq. "Don't you see how that war helped drive us from a budget surplus into debt and left few resources to use for other purposes, like health care, education, better transit systems, etc? That certainly affected all of us," I said. Jim said he supported the war since Iraq needed to be punished. He was amazed to hear, and not sure he should believe me, that Iraq had nothing to

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do with 9/11. We dropped the political debate, and he said he would read Obama's biography if I wanted him to. He read the first couple of paragraphs, far enough to read that Obama had worked as a community organizer, helping poor people get their landlords to fix the heat and directing the unemployed to agencies that could help them find a job. Without belaboring the point, because Jim has some smarts despite his lack of education, I silently hoped that he would make the connection between Obama as president and his own life.

I can feel the huge symbolism of Obama's election. As I walk down the street in my inner-city neighborhood or interact with store clerks, am I just imagining a slight easing of tension between the races? Are we smiling at each other more? Or is it merely North Carolina's vote for a black president and its move into the blue column that has lifted my mood? Maybe. I'm an optimist and like to imagine that life can change and get better. Jim, on the other hand, is a skeptic. He doesn't believe anything will change for him and his daily life. He is correct of course. The stimulus package, if it works, will help us collectively. He doesn't even believe that he should be singled out for special favors. The look he threw me said, What fool would expect the president to reach down and fix the problems of one man?

Recently though, I've noticed a shift in Jim's outlook. It might be due to the new sense of possibility in the air, despite the wretched economy. It might be the skills we've worked on and the encouragement to believe that he can learn to read. It might be the reality of seeing his sons drop out of school as he did many years ago. How can he tell them to stay in if he didn't? Suddenly he is excited, less hesitant. He is looking for a way to change his life, as he did earlier when he successfully beat a narcotics habit. He has taken the first steps to prepare for the GED exam. They will be baby steps, a tentative reach for a goal that may well be impossible for him; improving from fifth-grade reading and third-grade math to GED level is a huge leap for a fifty-year-old man. But who am I to say? I'll be there cheering him on, just happy that he can feel the energy of the times.