

## JESSE WHITE

# *The Pride of Illinois*

**J**ESSE WHITE has steadfastly devoted himself to helping others for his entire life — both as a public servant and as a private citizen. His unique life experiences make him a remarkable and an effective leader. As the longest-serving Secretary of State in Illinois history, White has made roads safer, improved customer service and changed the culture of the office, eliminating institutional corruption and wrongdoing. His record-breaking sixth term concludes in January 2023.

On June 23, 1934, Jesse Clark White Jr. was born into humble beginnings to Jesse White Sr. and Julia May White in Alton. The area in Alton in which White lived was nicknamed “Dogtown” and was known to flood easily and often. White would say later of the flooding, “You needed to learn how to swim quickly in Dogtown.”

At age 7, his family moved to Chicago’s Near North Side. From a young age, he demonstrated a talent for athletics; his favorites included baseball, basketball and gymnastics. White attended Waller High School (now Lincoln Park Academy), where he was recognized as an outstanding basketball star. In one game, he alone scored 68 points. His athletic ability and grade point average earned him numerous offers for collegiate scholarships.

As fate would have it, White accepted an invitation from Alabama State College (now Alabama State University) to be part of its basketball program. His influence on the Alabama Basketball Program is still felt today, as White continues to hold the record as the all-time scorer with 1,620 points. White spent his years in Alabama dedicated to his studies and sports, and during this time, he was also impacted by the cultural discord that was occurring throughout the country because of segregation and



White has mentored and coached children his entire adult life. His basketball abilities are still legendary at Alabama State University, where he holds the record for the player who scored the most points in school history.

underlying racism. Concurrently, White, as one of the college’s most talented basketball players, met Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. — a frequent attendee of home basketball games and the minister at the church White attended with his fraternity brothers.

While in attendance at church one Sunday, White has recounted that Dr. King announced that Rosa Parks had been arrested and the city fathers had asked King to lead the effort to stop racial segregation by the Montgomery Transit System. White joined Dr. King and Rosa Parks and participated in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which was considered a pivotal moment in the civil rights movement of the United States. White has credited Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as being one of his foremost mentors and an inspiration who has guided him throughout his life.

Following college, White returned home to Chicago. His ambition was to play for the Chicago Cubs, and he attended a walk-on tryout. There were more than 500 men there, and the team only drafted five individuals. White made the cut. The elation of that success was to be short lived, because four days before stepping onto the

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Following the lead of Dr. King, Rosa Parks and other civil rights leaders, I participated in the Montgomery Bus Boycott that ultimately led to the desegregation of the public transit system. This peaceful protest taught me the importance of perseverance and working together toward a common goal.



field with the team, he was drafted into the U.S. Army — he traded spring training for basic training.

Jesse White served as a paratrooper in the U.S. Army’s 101st Airborne Division. He devoted two years of his life to serving his country. He completed 35 jumps during his tenure, and at the completion of his service, he returned home to Chicago, where he promptly returned to his dreams of playing baseball. He continued to serve his country as a member of the Army Reserves and the Illinois National Guard.



The Jesse White Tumblers celebrated its 60th anniversary in 2019. More than 18,500 children have been part of the team.



Secretary White is the longest-serving Secretary of State in Illinois history.

White moved to Mesa, Arizona, to play for the Chicago Cubs farm system. As a center fielder, shortstop and third baseman, White was adept at being flexible on the field, as well as in life. He developed close relationships with his teammates, including “Mr. Cub” Ernie Banks. As White traveled around the country playing baseball, he still encountered segregation in states that he visited. In Texas, African American players were required to stay with Black families while they were in town for games. They were unable to stay at a hotel or even dine with their teammates.

One particular racial experience that affected White occurred in St. Cloud, Minnesota. He was eating dinner at a restaurant with his teammates and was sporting a brand new suit. Following dinner, a stranger approached him and struck him on the shoulder. White encouraged the man to go back inside and finish his meal, but the stranger refused and began to attack White. The stranger knocked him down to the ground and began to choke him. White defended himself and eventually overtook the man, who finally relented. When the police arrived, his attacker apologized to White and asked to shake his hand. White

incredulously listened to the attacker’s rationale of why he ambushed him. The assailant explained that he was jealous of White with his nice suit and tie, because he felt that was how he — a white man — should look. He continued to apologize, and White shook his hand. When White recounts the story, he emphasizes the lessons he learned about racism and ignorance — as well as forgiveness — and that he was also more than a little upset about ruining his brand new suit.

During the off-season, White lived in Chicago in the Marshall Field Garden Apartments in Old Town. White taught at Edward Jenner and Schiller Elementary schools during the day and worked for the Chicago Park District in the evenings. In 1959, as part of his job with the park district, he was asked to coordinate and stage a gymnastics show. White, with his experience as a gymnast as a child and gymnastics coach in college, was enthusiastic about this assignment, and he drained his savings account so he could purchase matching uniforms for the group’s performance.

After the gymnastics show, word spread about the tumblers, and shortly after, the Jesse White Tumbling Team was formed.

The team was soon performing at parks, YMCAs, block clubs, art festivals, schools, Chicago Cubs games and a host of other venues. According to the Chicago History Museum, the group became an “internationally recognized phenomenon.” The organization recently celebrated its 60th Anniversary in 2019. More than 18,500 children have performed as part of the Tumblers. To be on the team, White requires that they stay in school; maintain good grades; and stay away from drugs, alcohol and gangs. Fewer than 100 participants have been released from the team for violating rules since its inception. In 2014, the Chicago Park District Board of Commissioners dedicated the new Jesse White Community Center and Fieldhouse. It is the official home of the Jesse White Tumblers and serves the community with a variety of family-friendly events.

White was rapidly becoming a well-known leader in his community as an educator, an athlete and a coach. George Dunne, the Cook County Democratic Party chairman and 42nd Ward committeeman,

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Work hard, be honest, help people, never give up, love your fellow man and woman, give back to society, and don't ever discriminate.

began to encourage White to become involved politically. Dunne served as a life-long mentor to White. In 1974, White was elected as a state Representative. He represented the most culturally, economically and racially diverse district in the state.

As a legislator, White was devoted to his constituents, and he was enthusiastic about being able to serve his community, his city and his state. Part of his legislative agenda focused on human rights and labor. A bill White believed was important was the Good Samaritan bill. It allowed food pantries and organizations that feed the poor to receive donations from events. Leftover food from fundraisers and dinners was then able to be used to feed those in need instead of being



Secretary White joins Inspector General Jim Burns in 2016 to announce security upgrades that are featured on driver's licenses and identification cards.



Secretary White honors then-U.S. Senator Barack Obama during African American Heritage Month in Chicago in 2006.

discarded as waste. White was also a trailblazer as an advocate for equal rights for the LGBTQ+ community. An amendment to the Illinois Human Rights Act, signed into law in 2005, contains language from the bill sponsored by White from three decades earlier. He also served as chairman of the House Human Services Committee. White's dedication to human rights came in part from his personal experiences of discrimination.

White was able to serve in the General Assembly and to continue his career as a teacher, coach, role model and mentor. His experience as an educator inspired him to advocate for improving education, and he sought out opportunities for legislation that would fight crime and help senior citizens. He was an active member of the Elementary Education Committee and the Select Committee on Aging. He honorably served for 16 years as a Representative. In 1990, after the census, the boundaries of his district were changed to reflect the shifting population, and White took the opportunity to seek out a different office. He was elected the Cook County Recorder of Deeds in 1992.

Upon his arrival as the Recorder of Deeds, White's initial steps were to undo acts made by his predecessor. White also created a panel of advisors, including union members, which recommended solutions to improve customer services and relations. Office efficiency also emerged as a top priority of his administration, and White transformed the out-of-date pen and paper system for a computerized office — a herculean effort that was ahead of its time. White earned acclaim from real estate agents, homeowners and lawyers for the reduction of wait time it took to record documents and have them returned. What had previously taken six weeks now was accomplished in less than two weeks. He also saved the taxpayers \$4 million annually with his modifications, and increased revenue.

In 1998, White was elected to become the first African American Illinois Secretary of State. He began his administration with a focus on rooting out corruption, bribery and political activity within the office following a License for Bribes scandal that occurred during the previous administration. White

never shied away from shining the light on potential corruption and controversy, and with that belief and in an effort for greater transparency, Secretary White appointed James B. Burns as his inspector general in 2000. White restored integrity to an office that had been under a cloud of controversy when he first became Secretary of State. White, along with Burns as Inspector General, changed the culture of the office, eliminating all forms of institutionalized corruption and wrongdoing.

Secretary White also evolved the office with customer service initiatives that aimed to increase office efficiency and utilize technology. The Secretary of State's office serves more Illinois residents than any other office in state government and is the largest state office of its kind in the nation. White established himself as a leader nationwide with his innovative strategies for programs related to his office, including the Graduated Driver's Licensing (GDL) Program for teen drivers, which has led to a decrease in teen driving deaths by 74%; the Organ/Tissue Donor Registry; and the implementation of the Breath Alcohol Ignition Interlock Device (BAIID) program designed to prevent drunk driving. When COVID-19 affected the state, White swiftly moved services to a

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You don't jump out of an airplane and stop halfway. It's all the way.

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predominately online presence, so that customers could receive services they greatly needed without compromising their health and safety. Throughout the pandemic, White and his offices served the state and conducted more face-to-face transactions than any other state agency, but in a manner that prioritized the health and safety of customers and employees.

One of the greatest accomplishments of Secretary White's tenure has been his steadfast devotion to raising awareness about organ and tissue donation. White's sister, Doris, received a lifesaving kidney donation in 1991 that saved her life. In 1999, White included her in a public service announcement promoting organ donation. His belief in a program that saved his sister's life became one of his signature causes, and because of that dedication, the state's donor registry has more than 7.1 million registrants. He has received numerous



As State Librarian, Secretary White has promoted literacy at events and libraries across the state.



As an advocate for safer driving on our roads, Secretary White frequently reminds motorists about the rules of the road, as well as legislation that affects driving laws.

wards nationally and throughout the state because of his advocacy. White initiated legislation, which took effect in January of 2018, that allowed 16- and 17-year-olds the opportunity to register for the state's First Person Consent Organ/Tissue Donor Registry. Hundreds of thousands of teens have registered. The development of this program has saved and changed countless lives.

White's tenure as the longest-serving Secretary of State in the history of Illinois would be enough to cement his legacy in Illinois politics, yet the vast approval of his leadership further separates him from other elected officials. After being elected to office in 1998, he won landslide victories in 2002, 2006, 2010, 2014 and 2018. In 2002, White won all 102 counties in Illinois, and in 2018, he was reelected to a record-breaking sixth term, earning more than 3.1 million votes statewide — more than any other candidate in state history during a midterm election. On May 30, 2014, Secretary White became the longest-serving Illinois Secretary of State. His service to the state is unparalleled to any other official, and because of his

leadership and stability in office, his administration was able to focus on serving the residents of Illinois in an innovative and a thoughtful manner during his tenure.

Secretary White's service to his community, state and country has changed the landscape of Illinois forever. As a young man, Secretary White was a witness to history. His personal identity was formed during a time of chaos and division, and instead of allowing those experiences to stifle his growth and beliefs, he worked to better the world around him. Secretary White has impacted this state in a positive and an indelible manner. Many who have had the privilege of knowing him and learning from him are forever changed by his influence. White's legacy will remain as a spirited, yet kind and humble leader, who brings people together for causes that are close to his heart. He is a man of unimpeachable integrity and has demonstrated his strength of character during times of adversity. White's actions live up to his motto "Do something good for someone every day and don't ever look down unless it is to tie your shoes."