



Blessed Experiences: Genuinely Southern, Proudly Black

James E. Clyburn

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From his humble beginnings in Sumter, South Carolina, to his prominence on the Washington, D.C., political scene as the third highest-ranking Democrat in the House of Representatives, U.S. Congressman James E. Clyburn has led an extraordinary life. In *Blessed Experiences*, Clyburn tells in his own inspirational words how an African American boy from the Jim Crow-era South was able to beat the odds to achieve great success and become, as President Barack Obama describes him, "one of a handful of people who, when they speak, the entire Congress listens."

Born in 1940 to a civic-minded beautician and a fundamentalist minister, Clyburn began his ascent to leadership at the age of twelve, when he was elected president of his National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) youth chapter. He broke barriers through peaceful protests and steadfast beliefs in equality and justice. Of his success Clyburn says he was "blessed with nurturing parents, a supportive family, and loyal friends." But, he added, "my life was not just about knocking down doors and lowering barriers. I spent some time marching in the streets and occupying the inside of South Carolina jails." As a civil rights leader at South Carolina State College, as human affairs commissioner under John C. West and three subsequent governors, and as South Carolina's first African American congressman since 1897, Clyburn has established a long and impressive record of public leadership and advocacy for human rights, education, historic preservation, and economic development.

Clyburn was elected to Congress in 1992. Serving as copresident of his freshman class, he rose quickly through the ranks and was elected chair of the Congressional Black Caucus in 1999 and House Democratic Caucus vice chair in 2002. Three years later he was unanimously elected chair of the Democratic Caucus. When Democrats regained the House majority in 2006, Clyburn was elected House majority whip. Now as assistant Democratic leader in the 112th Congress, Clyburn, a self-described independent, prides himself on working to overcome barriers and destroy myths without becoming too predictable. "I have worked across party lines to further legislative causes, and on occasion publicly differed with some of my allies in the civil rights community," says Clyburn. "My experiences have not always been pleasant, but I have considered all of them blessings."

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