

E. J. JOSEY:  
THE LIBRARIAN WHO ASKED “WHY NOT”

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“Some men see things as they are and say why. I dream things that never were and say, why not.”<sup>1</sup> E. J. Josey achieved stardom in library science because he courageously asked the American Library Association “why not,” forcing the profession to confront its own internal flaws and challenging it to live up to its own ideals as written in the ALA Bill of Rights. By introducing a resolution at the 1964 ALA Conference preventing ALA officials from interacting with state library associations in the South which were refusing membership to blacks, Josey became the profession’s conscience and his leadership advanced American librarianship into an inclusive and modern profession.

Born in 1924, Eltonnie Junius Josey’s childhood in the segregated South defined his later contributions to library science. A Virginia native, Josey said, “It was early in my life that I realized that black Americans were second class citizens.”<sup>2</sup> He attended separate and unequal schools and was denied access to public libraries “in the kind of society that...dehumanized me as an African American [meaning I] had to fight not to be invisible as [Ralph] Ellison described us.”<sup>3</sup> Serving in the Army during World War II, he was violently threatened for refusing to go to the back of a bus, yet had the freedom to use a non-segregated library on base. Josey attended college on the G. I. Bill and ultimately received a MLS from SUNY in 1953, where he was the only black student in the program.<sup>4</sup> He joined ALA after graduation, but his race meant he was denied admission to the Georgia Library Association when he began work at Savannah State College.<sup>5</sup> That inequitable rejection foreshadowed Josey’s stand at the 1964 ALA Conference.

At the conference in St. Louis, Josey took to the podium and single-handedly compelled

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<sup>1</sup> Edward M. Kennedy, “A Tribute to His Brother,” *Vital Speeches of the Day* 34, no. 18 (July 1968): 547.

<sup>2</sup> E. J. Josey, “A Dreamer-With a Tiny Spark,” in *The Black Librarian in America*, ed. E. J. Josey (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1970), 297.

<sup>3</sup> Leonard Kniffel, “To Be Black and a Librarian: Talking with E. J. Josey,” *American Libraries* 31, no. 1 (January 2000): 82.

<sup>4</sup> Josey, “Dreamer,” in Josey, *Black Librarian in America*, 299–301.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 317.

the ALA to address racial injustice in the profession. Noting that President Johnson had just signed the Civil Rights Act, *Library Journal* observed that, “In this week, of all weeks, it was perhaps appropriate that the star who would close the show with pre-July 4 fireworks should be a Negro librarian.”<sup>6</sup> Josey’s heroism was precipitated by ALA officials honoring the Mississippi Library Association for its National Library Week program. As he recalled,

I exploded! I was seething with anger, for I remembered that three civil rights workers...had been murdered...buried somewhere in Mississippi.... I also remembered that the Mississippi Library Association had withdrawn from ALA rather than give membership to Negro librarians. My involvement in the Savannah [sit-in] Freedom Movement and my sense of honor as a human being caused me to ask for recognition.<sup>7</sup>

Josey put forth a resolution insisting “that ALA officers and staff members not be allowed, in their official capacity, to attend or speak at the meetings of those state library associations which were not chapters of ALA.”<sup>8</sup> Because state associations in Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi denied membership to black librarians, he demanded ALA exclude them from the national organization and professional privileges until they integrated. After fierce debate, his resolution passed, signaling “the beginning of the revolution within ALA to make it responsive to all of its members;” within a year of Josey’s resolution, he became the first black member of the Georgia Library Association, all southern state associations had integrated, and the ALA agreed to deny membership to segregated libraries.<sup>9</sup> Notwithstanding that triumph, the 1964 ALA conference was only the first step on Josey’s path to library science stardom.

Throughout his career, Josey labored to eliminate injustice in librarianship, as manifested by his founding of the Black Caucus of the ALA, his ALA presidency and public good crusade,

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<sup>6</sup> Eric Moon, “Two Stars from Georgia: Reflections on the ALA Conference in St. Louis,” *Library Journal* 89, no. 14 (August 1964): 2919.

<sup>7</sup> Josey, “Dreamer,” 314.

<sup>8</sup> Moon, “Two Stars from Georgia,” 2920.

<sup>9</sup> Josey, “Dreamer,” 317.

and his perseverance in recruiting minorities to the profession. Josey said, “Over the years, my affiliation with ALA has given me an opportunity to show the profession that, given a chance, the black librarian can be an asset to the organization, and...can make a contribution to the profession.”<sup>10</sup> In 1970, he organized the Black Caucus so that black librarians could present a united front against workplace discrimination and to promote leadership experience, such as serving on library boards, among black librarians.<sup>11</sup> Serving as the second black ALA President from 1984 to 1985, Josey noted, “It’s very seldom that a person who forms a caucus to wage battles against the parent organization is elected to head that same organization.”<sup>12</sup> During Josey’s tenure as ALA President, his vision centered upon the notion of “public good” because he believed the ALA’s mission should be connected to the public’s needs, whether economic, social, or educational. Josey asserted that “only through publicly supported institutions can we guarantee that restrictions will not be placed on the availability of information or on the potential users who may wish to access it.”<sup>13</sup> In the later part of his career, spent at the University of Pittsburgh School of Library and Information Science, Josey devoted himself to recruiting more minority students to librarianship.<sup>14</sup> He wisely maintained that “we must have in our library organizations and our associations people who look like America.”<sup>15</sup> Josey deplored the lack of funding for minority students in ALA-accredited degree programs, which he contended impeded professional diversity and minimized progress achieved in American librarianship since 1964.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Lawrence King, “Support for Human Rights in Librarianship: The Legacy of E.J. Josey,” in *E. J. Josey: An Activist Librarian*, ed. Ismail Abdullahi (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1992), 96–97.

<sup>12</sup> “A Man Who Goes By the Books,” *Ebony*, July 1985, 126.

<sup>13</sup> John Berry, “The Josey Challenge,” *Library Journal* 109, no. 12 (July 1984): 1266.

<sup>14</sup> E. J. Josey, “More Than Two Decades Later,” in *The Black Librarian in America Revisited*, ed. E. J. Josey (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1994), 357.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 359.

<sup>16</sup> E. J. Josey, “Diversity: Political and Social Barriers,” *Journal of Library Administration* 27, no. 1–2 (March–April 1999): 200–1.

Aside from his actions, Josey merited stardom due to his seminal book—*The Black Librarian in America*, published in 1970. It was the first book to address the role of black librarians in American libraries, who heretofore had been “unseen, unheard, and unknown.”<sup>17</sup> Unlike his predecessors, Josey was fittingly recognized for his contributions to the profession before his death in 2009. An entire monograph, *E. J. Josey: An Activist Librarian*, was written documenting his life, career, and contributions to the field, and in 2002 the ALA made him an Honorary Member—the highest honor possible within the association given in recognition of an individual’s exceptional service to the profession.<sup>18</sup>

To me, E. J. Josey deserves stardom because he generated necessary and powerful change in American librarianship and, in the process, demonstrated that being a librarian meant serving as a voice for the future even at great risk to one’s own career. Josey “understood beyond doubt that ALA, and the larger society, needed the contributions of all people.”<sup>19</sup> I believe Josey is a star by virtue of his participation in broader social change, such as the civil rights movement, which made him aware that professions must reflect the communities they serve in order to be dynamic institutions and also to help people improve their lives. In my opinion, equality and inclusiveness in the American library profession are Josey’s lasting legacies. However, I think he also symbolizes hope—in librarianship, in access, in diversity, and in people. Josey fulfills the maxim that “each time a man stands for an ideal, or acts to improve the lots of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope.”<sup>20</sup> Josey’s contributions should inspire each succeeding generation of librarians to follow their conscience as a professional.

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<sup>17</sup> Kniffel, “To Be Black and a Librarian,” 82.

<sup>18</sup> “Honoring the Best of the Best: ALA Award Winners 2002,” *American Libraries* 33, no. 8 (September 2002): 54.

<sup>19</sup> Clara Stanton Jones, “E. J. Josey: Librarian for All Seasons,” in *E. J. Josey: An Activist Librarian*, ed. Ismail Abdullahi (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1992), 10.

<sup>20</sup> Kennedy, “Tribute,” 547.

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