

# CHICAGO SUN★TIMES

## Messages of hope resonate in Cook County Jail on Christmas

December 25, 2019 by Nader Issa



DETAINEES RAISE THEIR VOICES DURING A SERVICE LED BY THE REV. JESSE JACKSON IN THE GYMNASIUM OF DIVISION 4 IN COOK COUNTY JAIL ON CHRISTMAS DAY. SANTIAGO COVARRUBIAS/FOR THE SUN-TIMES

Music was playing, hands were clapping and feet were moving.

With ministers preaching and smiles wide all around, this Christmas service could be heard outside and was a festive affair.

It would have been easy to forget the religious revival was being held in the Division 4 gymnasium of Cook County Jail.

It's been nearly five decades since the Rev. Jesse Jackson Sr. started the Christmas tradition at the jail. And Wednesday, after receiving a standing ovation, Jackson, 78, had a distinct message for the 250 detainees in the gym — one that he had them all repeat after him.

"I am ... somebody. ... I don't ... belong here," Jackson said, and the crowd answered.

The once-rousing speaker, who has slowed with age, was helped to the podium, and he was soft-spoken once he got there. But he wouldn't miss this service for anything — a point his politician and preacher friends made clear.

"You know, when I walked in, I said to myself, 'Rev. Jesse Jackson threw a party at the County Jail,'" joked U.S. Rep. Danny Davis, D-Ill. "I've come to share with everybody else the tremendous legacy that the Rev. Jesse Louis Jackson has provided. You talk about being a trouper."

Jackson and Cardinal Blase Cupich took church to the incarcerated on Christmas morning, leading separate religious services in the jail.

For many, the messages of comfort and hope stirred their emotions.

And a few received a special holiday gift.

"Some of you are in here afraid to leave because you're homeless," Jackson said. "This has become a homeless shelter for you. Others cannot afford bail. We've come to get you out of here."

Sure enough, he did.

Jackson, through his Rainbow PUSH Coalition, posted bail for four men who were in jail for weeks, unable to post their \$500 bond needed to get out. Businessman Willie Wilson said he would give another \$10,000 to bail out more detainees over the coming days.



(FROM L TO R) BISHOP TAVIS GRANT, AARON KINZER, REV. JESSE JACKSON, DIONTE JOHNSON AND BRIAN SERRATOS WALK OUT OF THE COOK COUNTY JAIL ON CHRISTMAS DAY. SANTIAGO COVARRUBIAS/FOR THE SUN-TIMES

Two recipients, 22-year-old Aaron Kinzer and 19-year-old Dionte Johnson, were booked earlier this month on marijuana charges. Another, 29-year-old Brian Serratos, was in for a DUI. And for a couple of different reasons — whether it was money or because their families wanted them to learn a lesson — they couldn't get out without Jackson's help.

After their surprise release, they all went separate ways for their Christmas plans.

Serratos planned a laid-back holiday relaxing at home and eating a hot meal.

"I feel great. I feel honored. I really just feel truly grateful for this day to be home with my family," Serratos said right after he walked out of jail arm-in-arm with Jackson and the other men. "My family and my son, that's all that matters right now."

Johnson, meanwhile, went to catch up with his 13 brothers and sisters and meet his newborn son whom he'd never seen.

Serratos and Johnson were just two of a couple of hundred men and women at Jackson's service who raised their hands when the reverend asked if they had kids at home.

"I would not have planned this, to see Christmas," Johnson said. "I thought I was going to be [in jail] for Christmas. I thank God for letting me go home to my family.

"I've been in trouble all my life, been in trouble with the law. So my people told me I gotta sit and I gotta think about the stuff I've been doing. ... I need to change for me, for everybody around me. I have little brothers and sisters who are looking up to me, it's not right if I'm locked up. It was hard coming up with the money."

For Kinzer, it would've been his first Christmas away from his family if he hadn't gotten bailed out.

So when he got out, he left with his mom — who waited for him at the jail entrance — to a Christmas dinner at a relative's house.

He said it felt good to see his mom sticking by his side through his legal troubles — even if she forced him to sit in jail and think about his actions by not bailing him out sooner.

"Seeing her just opened my eyes about a lot of things that I gotta change and how I go about things in life," Kinzer said. "I gotta start setting goals for myself and achieving them. ... It feels good being at home with people that love and care about me. It's just a good feeling that brings warmth to my heart."

Kinzer's mom, Eileen Thomas Kinzer, said "it's a blessing" that her son would be able to spend time with her, his dad and his two brothers for the holiday.

"You have to pay for your actions," she said. "But today Rainbow PUSH made it so he could spend some time with his family for Christmas."

Jackson said they shouldn't have been locked up in the first place.

"These are nonviolent offenses," Jackson said. "They should be at home and working."

# Chicago Tribune

## Christmas Day at the Cook County Jail

December 25, 2019 by Camille Fine / Chicago Tribune Gallery



1 The Rev. Jesse Jackson hugs an inmate after leading a Christmas Day service in the Cook County Jail. (Camille Fine / Chicago Tribune)



2 Inmates pray as the Rev. Jesse Jackson leads a Christmas service in the Cook County Jail gymnasium. (Camille Fine / Chicago Tribune)



3 The Rev. Jesse Jackson asks inmates and visitors to stand during a Christmas Day service in the Cook County Jail gymnasium. (Camille Fine / Chicago Tribune)



*4 Inmates applaud as the Rev. Jesse Jackson leads a Christmas Day service in the Cook County Jail gymnasium. (Camille Fine / Chicago Tribune)*



*5 Bishop Tavis Grant, from left, Aaron Kinzer, the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Dionte Johnson and Brian Serratos walk out of Cook County Jail after a Christmas service led by Jackson on Christmas Day. Jackson announced during the service that he would be posting bond for four inmates today: Kinzer, Johnson, Serratos, and Christopher Moreno. (Chicago Tribune)*



6 The Rev. Jesse Jackson greets inmates after leading a Christmas Day service in the Cook County Jail. (Camille Fine / Chicago Tribune)



7 Dionte Johnson, 19, from left, Aaron Kinzer, 22, Brian Serratos, 29, and Christopher Moreno, 21, are called to the stage by the Rev. Jesse Jackson during a Christmas service at Cook County Jail. Jackson announced during the service that he would be bailing out four inmates. (Camille Fine / Chicago Tribune)



8 Shirley "Moms Mabey" Whitmore greets inmates during a Christmas service at the Cook County Jail. (Camille Fine / Chicago Tribune)



9 U.S. Rep. Danny Davis speaks during the Christmas service at the Cook County Jail. (Camille Fine / Chicago Tribune)