

2020 SACHEM AWARD – REGINALD O. JONES, SR.

Governor Eric J. Holcomb

September 25, 2020

Remarks as prepared for delivery

Thank you, Cathy, and good morning all!

It's fitting we're gathered today at the Indiana State Museum, where history's not only preserved and learned, it's made.

And we're going to make some more Hoosier history here today, adding another to an exclusive list of exemplary citizens, whose names represent the best among us, and are engraved in our state capitol as recipients of the Sachem award.

It's an award so select, it's uniquely reserved only for Hoosiers whose lifetime of accomplishment and virtue has in turn made an incredible impact in the lives of their fellow citizens.

Special people, like Eva Mozes Kor, the Holocaust survivor who dedicated her life to forgiveness.

She received the first Sachem I had the privilege to give as governor, in 2017.

And while she went home to heaven last year, she leaves behind a legacy of love that continues to challenge and change hearts – for generations to come.

Two years ago, we gathered to present this award to a war hero and Medal of Honor recipient, Sergeant Sammy Davis, whose heroism on the battlefield is only matched by his heroic duty still advocating for our nation's veterans.

Last year, I was honored to present the Sachem to Dr. George Rapp, a global humanitarian and medical pioneer who invented new treatments, and built medical facilities that have saved lives around the world.

And this year, it's both a personal and professional privilege to bestow our state's highest honor, for only the 15th time in Indiana history, to Reginald O. Jones, Sr.

Spend a moment with Mr. Jones, and you'll quickly find out what's important to him.

He values his faith, his family, and the many individuals he's worked alongside with and mentored for decades.

And at the center of it all, is always action coming from a place of love.

Reggie's extraordinary life story is one of adversity overcome, through incredibly hard work and a relentless pursuit of his dreams.

It's a story of a self-made man, who took the hand he was dealt, sought and seized every opportunity, persevered against the odds, and eventually realized his dreams, owning – not one, but six – McDonalds franchises in Indiana.

And along the way, he devoted his life to investing in people, touching thousands of lives – many in profound ways – by giving so many the opportunities and encouragement they needed to achieve their own dreams.

They've become part of what Reggie calls his "McFamily."

He's too humble to admit it, but he carries forward the proud legacy of successful Black entrepreneurs, philanthropists, and change agents.

Hoosiers like Indiana's-own Madam C.J. Walker, who transformed not only our business landscape, but so many futures along the way.

And as far as his journey has taken him, and as high as he's climbed, "reaching back a hand to try to help someone else climb up," has remained his motto and his mission.

Maybe that's because he's never forgotten his roots.

Born in poverty in Prichard, Alabama, Reggie grew up in a small four-room home without running water, and sometimes without food.

From his single mom, and from his grandparents, he learned faith, character and self-esteem.

Determined to make a better life for himself and his family, he worked at a restaurant, all the while dreaming of the day when he'd be running his own.

When he shared his aspiration with some of his high school classmates, they laughed at him.

But 16-year-old Reggie was undeterred.

He wanted to better himself, and his community.

And he longed to buy his mom a real house.

At 18, he joined the Army, serving his nation and ours, learning endurance, discipline, and valuable leadership skills.

When he returned to civilian life, Reggie's drive and determination didn't go unnoticed.

An opportunity opened to manage a Wendy's in Harlem, New York.

He made the move.

And while he was climbing the corporate ladder, he still lacked the funds to take that next big step toward owning his own franchise.

Enter his mentor, Melvin Leverett, a man who shared Reggie's dream, and was willing to share his knowledge of selling real estate.

He taught Reggie how to renovate houses and sell them, so he could save up for the down payment on a McDonald's franchise.

But it also taught him a more valuable lesson: knowledge is the key to success.

Reggie eventually achieved his goal of becoming a McDonald's owner-operator, earning ownership of a franchise.

That lesson of gaining more knowledge stuck with him.

Because whenever it would've been easy to revel in success, Mr. Jones looked at all those communities around him, saw people who needed the same opportunities

he'd been given, and created innovative programs at his McDonalds locations, providing – not just “Big Macs,” but “McTutoring” – to help disadvantaged students improve their grades.

And when business took off, he surprised his mom, buying her a three-bedroom brick home.

When he was presented with the opportunity to move into the Indianapolis market, he jumped at it.

He purchased two restaurants, located at 38th and Illinois, and 16th and Meridian, and he built another from the ground up.

And Reggie, we're so glad you did.

In the inner city, Reggie saw homelessness, and poverty, and people in need of hope, and a new path to walk on.

Determined to be a “catalyst for change,” by helping others find their path to success, Reggie offered education scholarships to his crew members, and created an incentive program for children at Indianapolis Public Schools to study and earn free bikes, giving away more than 10,000 bikes over 20 years.

His innovative approach became known as the “Miracle on 38th Street,” and the “McMiracle” program he founded has been mirrored in McDonalds franchises across the country.

Another thing you'll learn if you talk with Reggie or the people who have worked for him is he's hands-on.

He often worked 15-hour days alongside his crew members, talking with them, getting to know them, trying to learn of their passions and help them learn the skills that have propelled so many to succeed well beyond the “Golden Arches.”

That's how he met Maurice Dunn, who's here with us today.

Maurice's childhood was rough, too, to say the least.

With his parents largely out of the picture, he missed fifth, sixth and seventh grades, scrounged for food, and lived on the street.

Reggie offered him his first job – and so much more.

In true Reggie Jones fashion, he took Maurice under his wing.

With Reggie's support and mentorship, Maurice earned a degree in construction management.

He started his own business.

Today, he runs a successful Indianapolis-based construction management firm, with employees of his own.

And his son will graduate college next year.

Talk about a game-changing, multi-generational positive force for good.

I could recount stories like this for the remainder of the day, and not scratch the surface, for we all know how lives are changed through the efforts of a dynamic role model, and Reggie practices what he preaches.

Now, some of you know, I've seen more than my fair share of McDonalds.

You could say I'm something of connoisseur.

And my wife Janet is never surprised to hear that's where I'm headed – including where I stopped immediately after being sworn into office, en route to the Statehouse, at the 16th and Meridian McDonalds.

But what's special about Reggie's restaurants isn't what's on the menu.

It's the people behind the counter, and the countless lives that he's touched on both sides of it.

Mr. Jones's life is defined by his mission-minded mentorship and his unstoppable desire to help people maximize their true potential.

He's served his nation in uniform.

He's served his neighbors at every opportunity, and welcomed so many into his "McFamily," often times those lost and looking.

He passionately believes that "McDonalds is a place for opportunities."

And he's given his time, talent and treasure, creating scholarships, quietly supporting the missions of other charitable organizations, helping people inside and outside the "Golden Arches."

He's done it by demonstrating that with limitless determination, perseverance, a thirst for learning, and with someone who believes in you – there's no dream that's impossible.

But I know he'll be the first to admit he had some help along the way, too.

He's had no greater supporter or stronger partner, than the love of his life, his wife, Tracey Jones.

They've accomplished so much, and helped so many, together.

And some of their greatest accomplishments are here with us today.

They're the proud parents of seven children, and grandparents to twelve.

You're all in for a real treat because you're about to hear from two of his children, Regina and Rebecca.

So, in closing, while this is far from the only award Mr. Jones has received...

He's been recognized not only by McDonalds, but by a president of the United States, by the U.S. Department of Commerce, the list goes on and on.

And with an honorary doctorate from Indianapolis' Martin University – in addition to the degree he earned there – that list is even longer.

But the greatest honor – and I know you agree, Reggie – that no frame can fit around, is evident in the lives transformed through your care and example.

Countless men and women, families and neighborhoods in our state are better because of your work.

Thank you, for all you've done to make "McMiracles" happen for so many disadvantaged youth in Indiana, and throughout your life.

We see in Luke, "To whom much is given, much will be required."

Congratulations, sir.

"Well done, thou good and faithful servant," well done.

For ALL these reasons, and so many more, it's my honor today, to lovingly present the 2020 Sachem award to a great Hoosier, Mr. Reginald O. Jones, Sr.