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Opinion

Among the Powerful Voices We Lost in 2024, Louis Gossett, Jr.’s Echoes Loudly

It was my last year as national president of the NAACP, at the end of 2013 Image Awards. I was with my dear friend Louis Gossett, Jr., the actor and activist who won an Oscar for his role in the film “An Officer and a Gentleman.” Lou said to me, “You know, Ben, I’ve been in this racial justice movement my whole life, but you know, sometimes, brother, I feel like we’re fighting over who’s in first class. What we should be doing is looking out the window, because the plane has fallen like 20,000 feet in the last two minutes.”

He saw I was a little confused. So he continued, “The planet is dying. It doesn’t matter who’s in first class on a dead planet.”
Lou’s words have stuck with me for over a decade. It was Lou’s voice echoing in my ear that inspired me to get back into the environmental movement and take my current job as the head of the Sierra Club.
December is the customary month of remembrance. A time of year we take stock; a moment on the calendar when we pause to reflect on the giants we have lost.
Louis Gossett, Jr. is one of those giants. He died this past March.
Lou never shied away from using his platform to fight for people and the planet. Remembering his passion for justice and the path he forged can be a guiding light. His example, like that of scores of other Black leaders we lost in



Ben Jealous
Guest Columnist

2024, has a special resonance for America’s Black men and boys. But it is an example that should inspire anyone who sees a situation that their own moral calling tells them needs to change.
As a child, Lou loved superheroes. When he did not see
“Pessimists are right more often, but optimists win more often.”

anyone who looked like him playing his favorite superhero, Superman, he decided to become one – both on and off the screen. The character he portrayed in “An Officer and a Gentleman,” Gunnery Sergeant Emil Foley, was a soldier highly decorated for his patriotism. Offscreen Lou was a true patriot himself.
Lou often spoke of the need to focus on the “bigger picture.” He pictured concentric circles as he thought about how people could make a difference and have an impact in their family, community, country, as well as the world. He founded the Eracism Foundation to promote cul-

tural diversity, historical enrichment, and anti-violence initiatives for young adults, teens and pre-teens through “Shamba Centers” throughout the country.
Lou contributed one of the autobiographical essays in my book Reach: 40 Black Men Speak on Living, Leading, and Succeeding. In it, he wrote about meeting Nelson Mandela when the South African leader was finally released from prison after 27 years. Lou said Mandela’s message was simple: there is no time to focus on revenge, which is a “self-inflicting disease;” the only thing we have time to focus on is “uplifting ourselves and one another for the bigger picture, which is the salvation of the planet.”
Lou spoke of the values passed on to him and his cousins by their grandmother: “collective responsibility; empathy; being ready, willing and able to help another person when he or she is down.” Those are values to live by. I can relate. My own grandmother’s wisdom continues to guide me. Her sage advice continues to be one of my mantras in life: “Pessimists are right more often, but optimists win more often. As for me, I’ll take winning.”
Of course, in addition to Lou, we lost many Black men this year whose lives and work inspired millions. Icons of stage and screen like James Earl Jones and John Amos, historymaking sports legends such as Willie Mays, and ti-

tans of the Civil Rights Movement like Rev. James Lawson, whom Dr. King called “the leading theorist and strategist of nonviolence in the world.” We lost Quincy Jones, who not only left an indelible mark on the music industry but was a champion for civil and human rights. And many others.
In my introduction to Reach, I noted that imitation has always been the first step for those seeking to achieve great things. Children pick up sticks to reenact the battles of warrior heroes. Toddlers preach to congregations, or sing to crowds, of teddy bears and puppets. Babies step into their parents shoes and try to walk. But we cannot imitate – or draw inspiration from – that which we have never seen, heard, or read about. I hope people continue to learn about my friend Louis Gossett, Jr. and the other giants we lost because the examples they set are surely ones to be imitated.
Lou’s hope was that younger generations grow up to remember that bigger picture of which he spoke. That “instead of talking about the salvation of the Irish or the Jew or the Black, they talk about the salvation of mankind and the planet. I think we can ask for and expect nothing less.”
Hear, hear.
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ing my home and business in D.C. while commuting to DC often and assuring that she is never alone.
It’s a decision that thousands of family members around the country are making every day. An AARP article reports that particularly African-Americans have a sense of community and culture when it comes to caregiving. For me, it was just pure love.
I moved in just as COVID-19 hit the U. S. Thankfully, neither Mama; nor I caught the virus during the pandemic. But there is no one I’d rather have been quarantined with. Still, it was almost impossible to protect her from an injury related to her instability on her feet from the Alzheimer’s. In 2019 she had fallen and broke a bone in her back. In July 2020, she fell and suffered a fracture to her hip for which she had surgery. Last year, she suffered a hairline fracture in her lower leg, climbing into a van to go to church.

I Upended My Life to Take Care of Mama. It Was One of the Best Decisions I Ever Made.

It was an autumn morning in 2018 when my phone rang in Washington, DC and I’ll never forget the sound of Mama’s voice on the line. She was calling from her home in Virginia, 100 miles away. Her voice, normally warm and sweet, was instead rife with anger.
“Who took the knobs off my stove?!” she demanded. My heart broke toward her. All she wanted was to fry herself an egg for breakfast.
How could I tell her that we, her four adult children, had met and decided to have the knobs removed from her kitchen stove? In order to protect her life – we could never again allow her to cook on an open range because her doctor had told us that she was in the early stages of Alzheimer’s/Dementia?
How could I tell her that the stove where she had for decades lovingly cooked all of our family’s favorites during the holidays was now off lim-



Hazel Trice Edney
Guest Columnist

its to her – forever. Her fried chicken, mac & cheese, sweet potato and apple pies would only be tasted in our imitation recipes.
Hearing her angst, I responded quickly in what I thought was the best way possible at that time in order to avoid traumatizing her. I’m sorry, but I lied. I told Mama that the stove was broken and that my son, her grandson, Monte, had removed the knobs temporarily until he had time to fix it.

That did it. She slowly calmed down. After all, in her eyes, Monte could do no wrong. We advised her to start heating up frozen meals in the microwave instead.
As the disease progressed, it was not long after that difficult conversation that we made another sacrificial decision. We knew that Mama could no longer live alone. Period. We sought professional

“It’s a decision that thousands of family members around the country are making every day

in home care. But that assistance was limited.
I resolved that the love that she had bestowed upon our family all of our lives was enough for me to upend my life in order to now take care of her. So, I moved, a hundred miles outside of D.C., to become her primary caregiver for as long as she needs me. For me, it required maintain-

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