

## Biography of Louis and Carl Stokes

Carl and Louis Stokes are two African American brothers who were born into extreme poverty at a time in history when opportunities for people of their race were very limited. Their lives took them from public housing to successful political careers. They not only became successful, but their achievements helped to change the American landscape to create equal opportunities for all African Americans. They credit their mother Louise for instilling in them lifelong lessons about education and hard work.

Their parents Louise and Charles Stokes were both migrants from Georgia who married in Cleveland in the early 1920's. They, like many other African Americans in the South, moved to the North to escape segregation and for better job opportunities. Their first son Louis was born in 1925; Carl was born in 1927. Charles Stokes, a laundry worker, died in 1928 leaving Louise, a domestic worker, to raise her sons alone.

Louise struggled to support her family by working in the homes of well-to-do Clevelanders. Once when her sons were with her in an employer's home she heard them saying that they wanted many toys like the rich children. She took them into the library and pointed to the books. "These should be your toys," she told them. Her own home was a sharp contrast to the homes in which she worked since she could not afford decent housing. In 1938, however, the family moved to Outhwaite Homes, the first federally-funded housing in Cleveland providing a safe home and neighborhood. Both brothers listened to their Mother's advice and used books as a means to escape from a life of poverty. She encouraged them to work hard in school "To Become Somebody" who would make a difference in the world.

Louis Stokes began his adult life upon his graduation from Central High School in 1943. He then enlisted in the United States army serving his country during World War II. Since the army was segregated at this time, African Americans did not share the same housing and other facilities with white soldiers. He was discharged from the army in 1946 and enrolled at Western Reserve University (now part of Case). In 1948, he graduated from Western Reserve University College and enrolled at Cleveland Marshall Law School. He graduated with a law degree in 1953 and began practicing law that same year. In 1957, he formed a law partnership with his brother Carl. His law practice gave him an opportunity to represent people who may not otherwise have someone to defend them. He even represented a client in front of the Supreme Court in *Terry v. Ohio*. His political career began in 1969 when he was elected in Cleveland to represent Ohio's 21<sup>st</sup> district in the United States Congress. He served for 15 consecutive terms, a total of 30 years. During that time he was a member of many Congressional committees including the House Select Committee on Assassinations and the House Select Committee on Covert Arms Transactions with Iran. Louis Stokes retired from Congress in 1999 and is currently practicing law. In 2003, he was honored by Congress with The

Congressional Distinguished Service Award. In his acceptance speech, he credited his Mother Louise for her influence on his success.

Carl Stokes' adult life began in 1944 when he dropped out of East Tech High School. He joined the army in 1945. In 1947, he returned to East Tech and received his diploma. That same year, he enrolled at West Virginia State College. In 1948, he enrolled at Western Reserve University. He graduated from Western Reserve University in 1952 and enrolled at the University of Minnesota. In 1954, he graduated with a B. A. in Law and enrolled at Cleveland Marshall Law School. He graduated with a law degree in 1956. Carl Stokes had two government jobs before joining his brother to practice law in 1957. In 1962, he was elected to the Ohio House of Representatives. He was the first African American Democrat from Cuyahoga County elected to the Ohio Legislature. He served in this position until he was elected Mayor of Cleveland in 1967. Carl Stokes was elected the first African American Mayor in a major American city. Carl, a great-grandson of a slave defeated Seth Taft, a grandson of a President. After a second term as Mayor, Carl Stokes left politics for a job as an anchorman in New York City. He then became a municipal judge in Cleveland in 1983. He began his last political post in 1994 when President Clinton appointed him Ambassador of the Republic of the Seychelles. Carl Stokes died on April 3, 1996 after a rich political career.

Both Louis and Carl Stokes credited their Mother with their success. Both men served their community and their country in distinguished careers. They both used education as a means to change their lives and their legal background as a way to help change the establishment. The Stokes Brothers, along with others, helped to provide a voice in government for all Americans. Do you think they "Became Somebody" who would make a difference in the world?