



Johnetta B. Cole

“

Here we stand on the edge of the twenty-first century and still we are not free.

— Conversations

”



Biography

Johnetta Betsch was born October 19, 1936 in Jacksonville, Florida. Financially and socially Johnetta’s parents John and Mary Frances provided a home environment for her that few African-Americans experienced during the mid 1930s and early 1940s. Johnetta’s family was very influential in the community because they founded an insurance company, the Afro-American Life Insurance Company, during the turn of the century. They were also educators; the public library in her neighborhood was named after her grandfather.

There has been much written about Dr. Cole’s family over the years and their influence on her. While some in the family had always assumed that Johnetta would go into the family’s insurance business, she proved at an early age that she was her own woman when she announced to the family that she was going to be an anthropologist. Johnetta Betsch began her studies at Fisk University at the tender age of 15, then went to Oberlin College, and earned a Ph.D. in anthropology from Northwestern University.

Quick Facts

- * Born in 1938
- * African-American anthropologist, educator, and activist
- * Served as President of two colleges

This page was researched and submitted by DeLoice Holliday on 12/13/02.



Johnetta B. Cole

Biography continued

Dr. Cole divorced her first husband, economist Robert Cole, in 1982. She later married Arthur J. Robinson, Jr., who is a public health administrator, in 1988. She has three sons and two stepsons.

Johnetta focused her educational career on cultural anthropology, African American studies, and Women's studies. She conducted major research in Liberia on labor issues; in Cuba, Haiti, and Grenada on racial and gender inequality; on the South Side of Chicago's black churches; on female-headed households; on the ways women age; and on Cape Verdean culture in the United States. The role of teacher is most important to her, though, as Johnetta quips in a recent interview: "the students were seeing me in roles I like to be seen in, as teacher and activist."

While serving as President of Spelman College in Atlanta, Johnetta conducted major fund-raising campaigns and raised several million dollars. Johnetta is also active politically. Named to President-elect Bill Clinton's transition team as cluster coordinator for education, labor, and the arts and humanities, her responsibilities included reviewing the Department of Education's budget and proposing recommendations for change. Rumors and speculations circulated at the time that she was being considered for the post of Secretary of Education. That possibility came to an abrupt halt when a Jewish weekly newspaper, *Forward*, and several other conservative publications alleged that she was a pro-Communist, anti-Israel radical and a disciple of Fidel Castro. As evidence they cited her ties to the U.S. Peace Council and the Venceremos Brigade, both left-wing organizations have been identified by the FBI as being linked to the former Soviet Union and to Cuba. These attacks on Johnetta's personal and political character left her devastated, but strong and determined to continue to do what she deemed "important work."

One can only imagine how Johnetta finds the time to carry on speaking engagements, co-author and pen the forward to many books, as well as continue a successful publishing career as the sole author on a number of books.



Johnetta B. Cole

Biography continued

Johnetta B. Cole has had a distinguished career as an educator. She worked at Washington State University, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and Hunter College. She was also part of the graduate faculty of the City University of New York, and she was the President of Spelman College. Dr. Cole then held a chair in Anthropology at Emory College.

After retiring from Emory in 2001, Johnetta has come out of retirement to take on the presidency of Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina. Unlike at Spelman, Dr. Cole will not be the only or the first African-American female president at Bennett College. Before Dr. Cole, Dr. Willa B. Player, Gloria Randle Scott, and Dr. Althia F. Collins served as presidents at Bennett. In a press release Dr. Cole was quoted as saying, "Only the challenge to help Bennett College soar to the heights of its possibility could have brought me out of retirement."

Dr. Cole has many educational awards and honors including more than forty honorary degrees from some of the most prestigious learning institutions across the United States. Dr. Cole is the author of the books *Conversations: Straight Talk with America's Sister President* and *Dream the Boldest Dreams: And Other Lessons of Life*. She is co-author of *Higher Ground: Preparing African-American Children for College* and *Across Boundaries: The Journey of a South African Woman Leader*.

Dr. Cole's publishing history speaks for itself, with numerous published works that concern the education of black women. Not only has she written works as the principle author but she has written the forward to several publications by other authors. She has also written numerous journal articles and book chapters. Dr. Johnetta B. Cole's deep regard for women, children, and human rights are reflected in all of her works.



Johnetta B. Cole

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