

## INTRODUCTION

There's something almost magical about a child's naiveté. A monumental, life-changing event could be unfolding right before them, yet their innocence acts as a shield, keeping them blissfully unaware that history is being made. But that same shield that protects them from the weight of the world can also keep them from understanding its significance. Sometimes, it's a gift. Other times, it's a veil, keeping them from seeing the weight of the moment until years later.

I was no different. Like most children, I lived in the present, unaware of the weight of history unfolding around me. I didn't yet understand how moments became milestones, how a name etched onto a street sign could mean more than just words on metal. And on this very day, as I stood on the other side of the rope, separated from the gathered crowd, I scanned the faces surrounding me. Some were filled with pride, respect, and honor, while others were wet with tears, overcome with emotion.

It was April 1991. My mother, my father, Sandy F. Ray III, and I were in attendance at the street naming ceremony honoring my great-grandfather, the Honorable Reverend Dr. Sandy F. Ray.

Great Grandpa Ray was a leader, a visionary, and a force of unwavering faith, far beyond just a reverend. A dedicated advocate for civil rights, he spent his life not only preaching but actively building pathways to justice. Over time, his church, Cornerstone Baptist Church in Brooklyn, grew to over 5,500 members. But his influence extended far beyond the pulpit.

As the first Black representative elected to the Ohio State Legislature, he paved the way for others in politics. He was a founding member of the board of directors for the Gandhi Society for Human Rights, standing alongside many giants of justice. From 1968 to 1979, he served as Vice President of the National Baptist Convention, a testament to the respect he commanded in the faith community. He also served as President of the Empire Missionary Baptist Convention from 1954 to 1979, solidifying his legacy as a leader in both faith and public service.

But his love for his people wasn't just in words, it was in action. He poured into Brooklyn, uplifting the community through real estate, developing commercial properties, and even establishing the first Black-owned credit union in the area. He didn't just serve his congregation; he built a foundation for generations to come. He transformed the neighborhood, ensuring that his legacy would live beyond the church walls and into the streets of New York City.

As an 8-year-old, impatience bubbled within me as my eyes scanned the crowd. I wasn't thinking about the weight of the moment or why we were here. I just knew I hated being dressed up. I was a tomboy, even then, and the whole ordeal of doing my hair, wearing stockings, a skirt, and those uncomfortable dress shoes was the absolute worst.

But what I did love was the red carpet. Cornerstone was known for this bright, bold carpet that ran throughout the church, and I remember running down it like royalty. Because honestly, who was going to stop the great-granddaughter of Rev. Dr. Sandy F. Ray from running in church? No one ever did. And when it came time to eat, I never waited in line. I went straight to the front, another quiet perk of the legacy I carried.

Just as I was about to tug on my mom's dress and ask her when lunch was, a sudden gust of wind swept through the air. The April breeze felt different that day, almost alive, almost intentional. My eyes locked onto the way it danced through the leaves, lifting them effortlessly and setting them adrift like whispers from another time.

Drawn to it, I followed the wind's path, watching as a single leaf spiraled downward and landed gently at my feet. I bent down and picked it up, running my fingers along its edges, worn, delicate, yet still strong. It wasn't like any leaf I had ever held before. Its veins stretched across the surface like stories etched in time, reminding me of the veins on our own hands, weathered by age yet rich with memory, carrying generations within them. Both silent storytellers. Its color was faded, yet full of history. I couldn't shake the feeling that it had been waiting for me.

Suddenly, I wasn't just standing on a Brooklyn street anymore. As the voices around me spoke with pride, honoring the past, I was transported into the very time they described, an era shaped by giants, when my great-grandfather stood among legends like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

That wind carried me back to a moment I could only imagine, a time when even the smallest whisper of nature held the weight of an era. It was September 20th, 1958. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. sat in a bookstore, signing copies of his memoir *Stride Toward Freedom*, when he was critically wounded in a stabbing. The injury was so severe that doctors later told him if he had so much as sneezed, he could have died.

After two hours of emergency surgery, as King was being discharged from the hospital, my great-grandfather received a call from someone in King's camp. Dr. King was on his way to him.

The relationship between Reverend Sandy F. Ray and Dr. King was more than one of respect, it was a deep brotherhood. Dr. Ray and Martin Luther King Sr. first met as classmates at Morehouse, forging a bond so strong it naturally extended to the next generation. Their closeness left such an impression on a young Martin Luther King Jr. that he grew up believing Dr. Ray was his actual uncle, affectionately calling him "*Uncle Sandy*." It wasn't blood that bound them, but chosen family, a connection rooted in trust, love, and shared conviction. Under Dr. Ray's leadership, Cornerstone Baptist Church became more than a house of worship; it was a spiritual refuge and a beacon for those seeking strength in the fight for justice.

My foundation, my Great Grandpa Ray, was a man so grand that even in one of Dr. King's most trying moments, he carried him. He was not just a pastor; he was a shepherd, a pillar of faith, a man who covered and protected those destined for greatness. He was a spiritual anchor for a leader who changed the world.

And fortunately for me, he passed down that same strength, that same unshakable faith, the very essence of why I feel called to write this book: to explore the intersection of politics, power, purpose, and the humanity within it all.

As I watched through the window, I saw Great Grandpa Ray greet Dr. King with warmth and reverence. But just as I took in the moment, something unexpected happened. Great Grandpa Ray turned toward the window.

At first, I thought he was simply catching his reflection in the glass, but then his gaze deepened. It was as if he could see through the glass, through time itself, as if he saw me. My breath caught in my throat. I wanted to hide, to move, to do anything, but I was frozen in place.

He stared into the window, seemingly at himself, yet I knew the truth. It wasn't his own reflection he was seeing, it was me. A knowing expression flickered across his face, as though he recognized me, as though he was silently telling me: *I am with you*.

Just as I took a step closer to be sure, my mom grabbed my arm, pulling me back to the present, the moment we had all been waiting for. The leaf slipped from my hands, and the vision faded. I snapped back to reality, standing once again on this crowded Brooklyn street. At just 4'5" at the time, already tall for my age, after being lost in the vision and absorbing every ounce of my great-grandfather's legacy, I suddenly felt so much smaller, so unaccomplished, so unaware of the vast world that existed beyond my childhood understanding.

As they prepared to unveil the street sign, a piece of my great-grandfather's legacy was about to be cemented into history. What I didn't know then was that, 25 years later, an honorable moment, one that would make me feel far greater than the small girl I was that day, would find its way to me.

A powerful politician, a man from this very neighborhood who had shattered barriers and redefined leadership, a man known for standing unwaveringly on the right side of justice, a man I would one day fall in love with, would one day look at me, Jasmine Ray, with great conviction, with a sincerity that resonated deep, and say words that would echo through time:

"Jasmine, your family lineage is that of a *protector of kings*, and you, too, were born for this moment—to *stand in that same power*."

Though I never got to meet my great-grandfather, I feel the weight of his prayers, the strength of his protection, and the undeniable pull of his spirit. His protector's nature didn't end with him, it lives within me.

Throughout my journey into politics, life, and love, I have felt something greater than myself, a force guiding me, an unseen hand shaping my path. A layer of blessings, a presence too powerful to explain, but impossible to deny. A protector from the past, standing guard over a protector of the present.

My journey is one of resilience and vulnerability, of faith and love, of duty and destiny. And just as my great-grandfather was called to protect a King, I was called to stand beside one.