



experience. The self-taught and prodigious artist had to break through racial barriers in every field he pursued. Of the many honorary college degrees he was awarded, Parks dedicated one to the teacher who had told him not to bother going to college—because it was she who had inspired him throughout his life to prove her wrong.

Inspiration can well up from surprising places

By Nancy McAllister

Gordon Parks, the youngest son of 15 children, was born in 1912. His father was a dirt farmer in Kansas, and when his mother died, Parks began making his living at 15 by playing piano in a brothel, singing, washing dishes, and waiting tables on a train. Poor and black, Parks attended high school, but never graduated. While he was in school, one of his teachers told the students in his class not to waste their parents' hard-earned money on college because they were just going to end up being maids and porters anyway. In 1938, Parks bought a \$7 camera from a pawn shop and set out to prove his teacher wrong.

“I picked up a camera because it was my choice of weapons against what I hated most about the world, including racism, intolerance, and poverty,” Parks said. Eventually, he became a photographer for *Life* and *Vogue* magazines, made several films (one of which was *Shaft*), wrote novels, poetry, orchestral scores, and cofounded *Essence* magazine. He volleyed back and forth in life, from high fashion to chronicling the African-American