



Discover how anthropologist,  
author, educator and activist  
**Dr. Johnnetta Betsch Cole**  
became an acknowledged  
and sought-after  
African American Leader  
throughout the  
United States of America.



#### CONTACT

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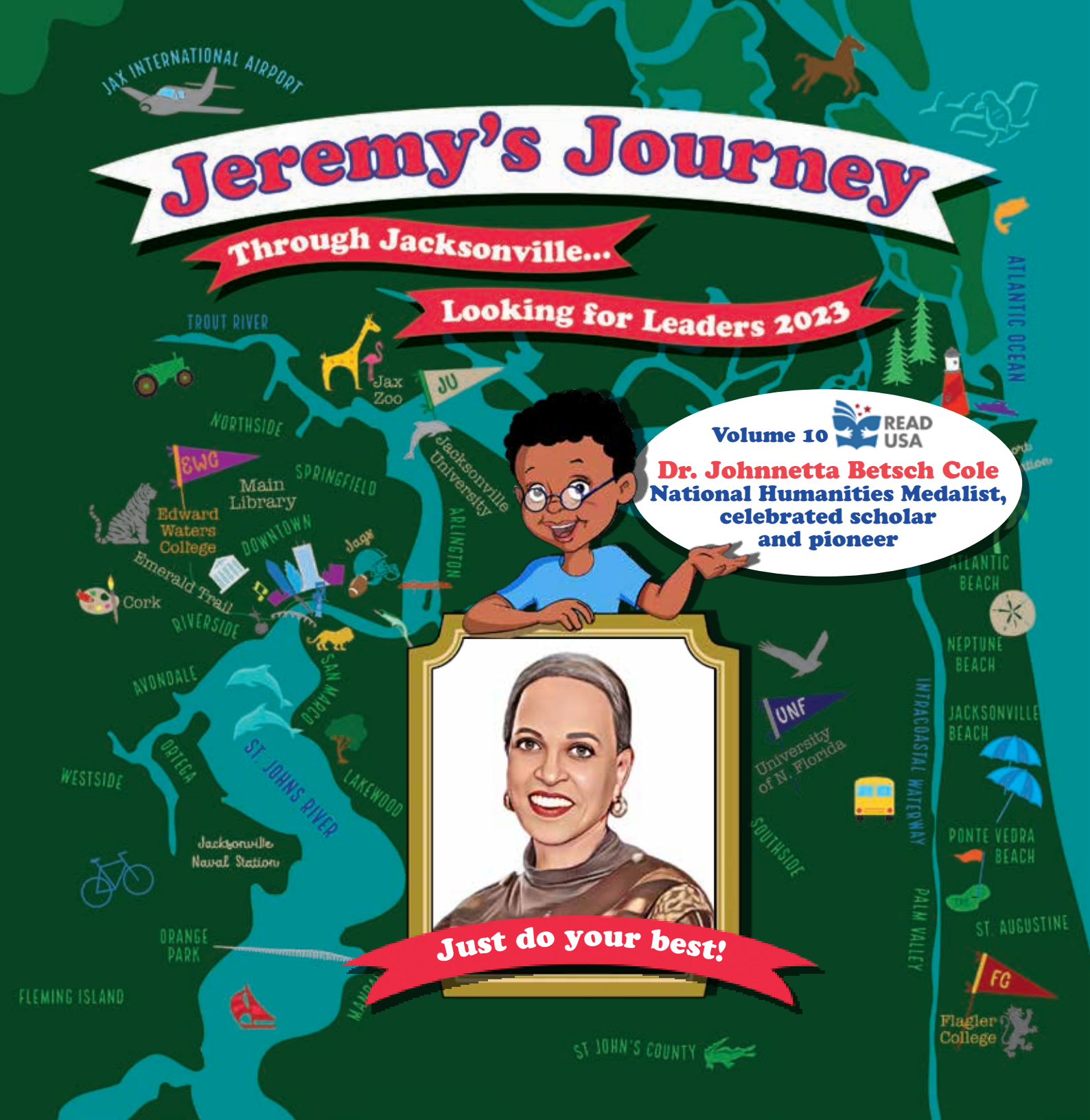
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Jeremy's Journey 2023

Volume 10

Dr. Johnnetta Betsch Cole



**This book is dedicated to my  
youngest grandson, Trysten.**

**Just do your best!**

**— Dr. Johnnetta Betsch Cole**

# **Jeremy's Journey**

**Through Jacksonville...**

**Looking for Leaders 2023**



**Volume 10**

**Dr. Johnnetta Betsch Cole**

**National Humanities Medalist,  
celebrated scholar and pioneer**

**Just do your best!**



**Book of the Month**

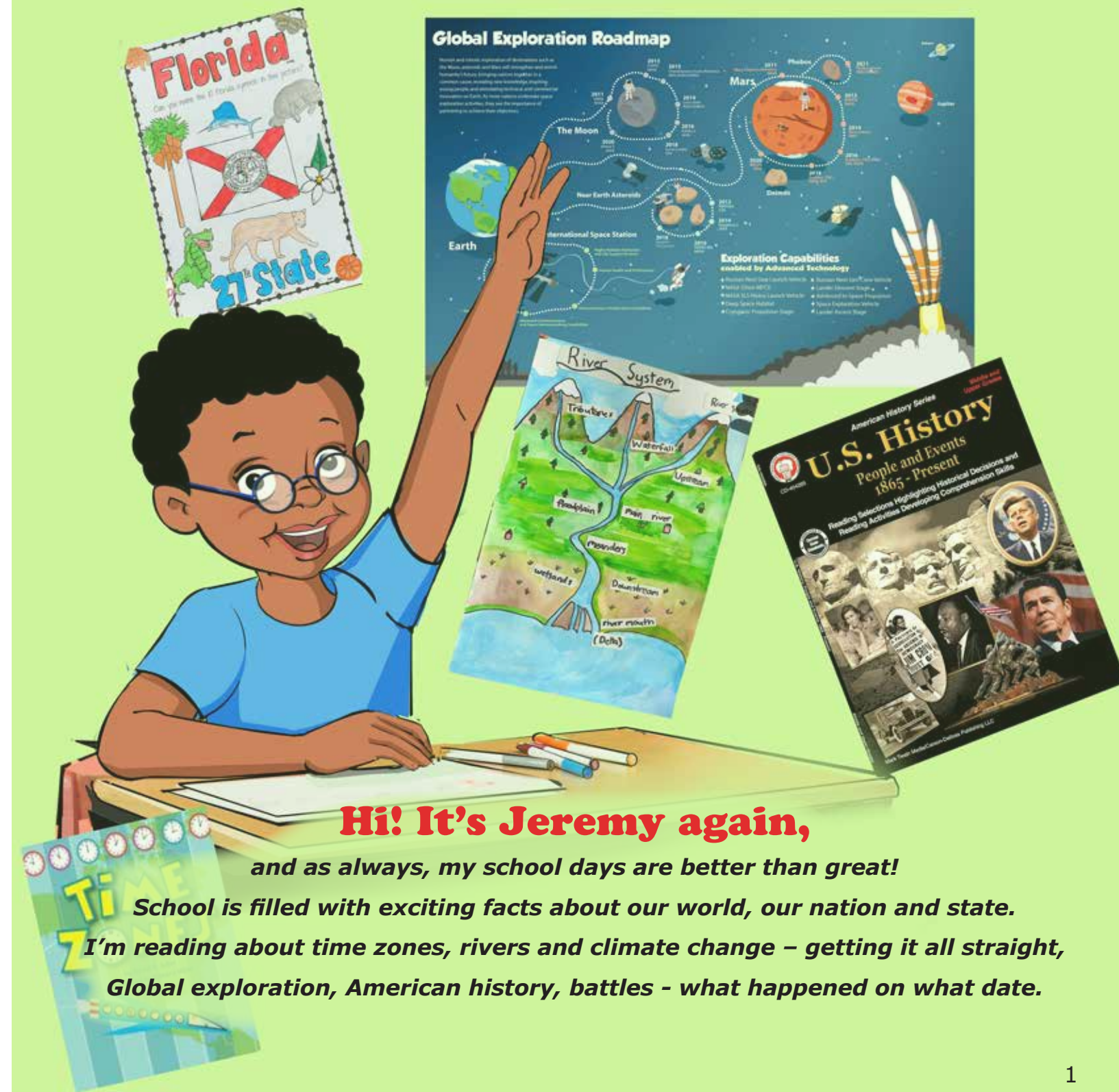


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Layout and Design by Sally Sharp  
Published by Susan the Scribe, Inc.  
[www.susanthescribe.vpweb.com](http://www.susanthescribe.vpweb.com)

ISBN: 978-1-958174-25-8



**Hi! It's Jeremy again,**

**and as always, my school days are better than great!**

**School is filled with exciting facts about our world, our nation and state.**

**I'm reading about time zones, rivers and climate change – getting it all straight,**

**Global exploration, American history, battles - what happened on what date.**



***And right here in Jacksonville, Florida, history is made every day,  
As important leaders meet in town with ideas and values to convey.***



***At school we learn about science,  
technology, engineering and math,  
While our national and local leaders  
work to create the best path.***



***As for my quest to find a great leader and emulate them,  
Dr. Johnnetta Betsch Cole, a celebrated educator, is a sparkling gem!  
She was President of Spelman and Bennett Colleges –  
the only two Black colleges for women in our country's history.  
She's written books, she's lectured and led, and she's taught anthropology.***



*Descended from Florida pioneers, she has deep roots in Jacksonville's past.  
Her family's important contributions to this community have been vast.*

**Dr. Johnnetta Betsch Cole is  
an activist, a thinker, a writer and a reader.**

*She, too, is a pioneer, influencer and unifier, a lightning rod for change –  
she's my kind of leader*



I'm meeting Dr. Cole at the Main Library downtown. Oh, here she comes now!

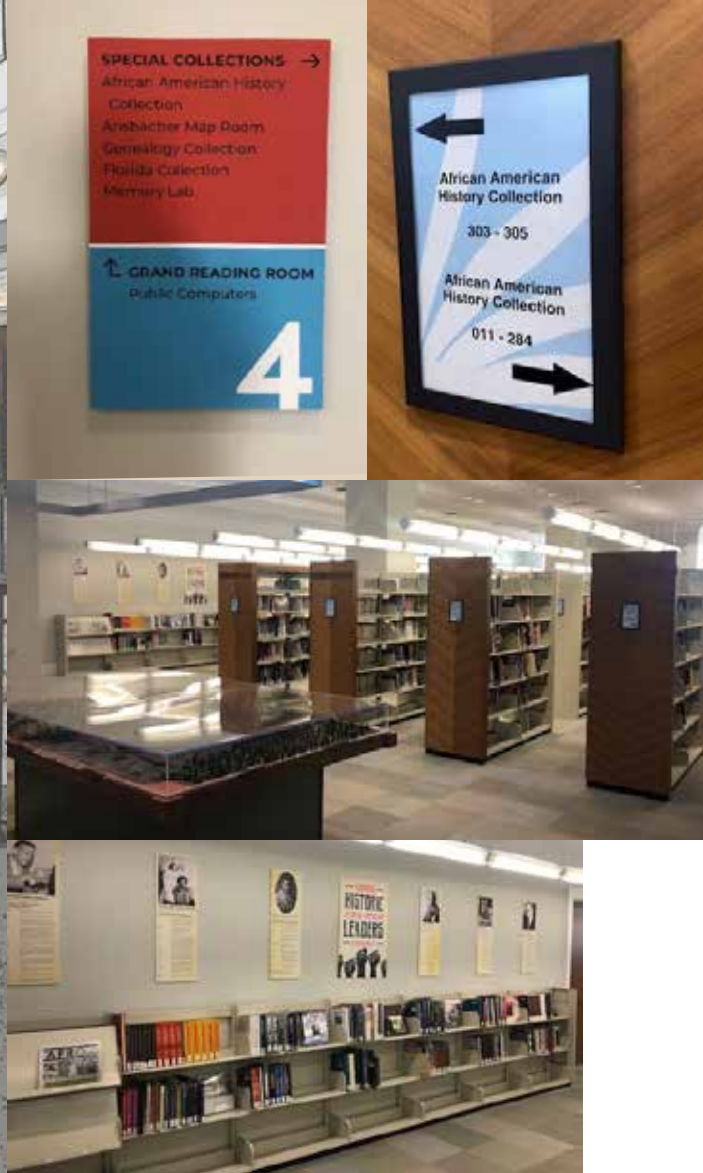


Hello Dr. Cole! I'm so thrilled to meet you!



Hello Jeremy! I'm thrilled to meet you, too. What a fine young person you are to be interviewing leaders for READ USA!





Thank you, Dr. Cole. Where shall we sit and talk in this great library?



Let's go up to the 4th Floor and sit near the African American Collection. They may have a couple of my books there.



Wow! I feel so privileged to be here with you. How many books have you written, Dr. Cole?



Jeremy, I have written so much in my lifetime – 33 books that I have written or edited or written the forewords for. I am referenced in 40 books about famous African Americans, and I have written introductions to nine art catalogues. Can you believe this, Jeremy? I wrote the liner notes for Nancy Wilson's CD, *Love, Nancy*, and I have a recipe for banana pudding in a cookbook. Here are just a couple of titles of my books I think you would really love: *African Proverbs for All Ages*, and *Dream the Boldest Dreams: And Other Lessons of Life*.



I want to read all of them! I know you grew up here in our hometown of Jacksonville, Florida. Can you tell me about your childhood, Dr. Cole?





**A. L. Lewis,  
my great-grandfather**



**My family (I'm behind my dad)**



Where do I start, Jeremy ... that was a long time ago, but I remember everything vividly. One thing about our family was that my older sister, Marvyne (later she changed it to MaVynee), and my younger brother, John Thomas Betsch, Jr., and I were the great-grandchildren of Abraham Lincoln Lewis, Jacksonville's most prominent African American citizen. A. L. Lewis (which he preferred to be called) only finished the 6th grade, but he and six other Black men, with a lot of hard work and he would say God's blessings, started the Afro-American Life Insurance Company – the first insurance company in Florida. Being the great-grandchildren of a wealthy executive gave us some privileges, but we still experienced racism.



What happened?



Well, here's an example of how my family having money could not protect me from racism. It was because of my family's wealth that my mother would get a call from a salesperson at the big department store in Jacksonville, and the salesperson would say, "We just got in some pretty new dresses at the store. Bring the girls down tonight after the store closes and they can try on the dresses." You see, Jeremy, in those days, Black people could not try on clothing in such a store because of the color of their skin. One night on the way home from the store, I said to my mother, "If I cannot try on clothes in the light of day, I don't ever want to try them on again in the darkness of night." That was my first act as a social justice activist, Jeremy!



Wow, Dr. Cole. I'm ten years old right now, and I want to be a powerful social justice activist just like you – right now!



Do you know what, Jeremy? I think you are already a young social justice activist.



Thank you, Dr. Cole.



I want to tell you another story, and it's about my first-grade teacher, Ms. Vance, who helped me become who I am today.



What did Ms. Vance do?



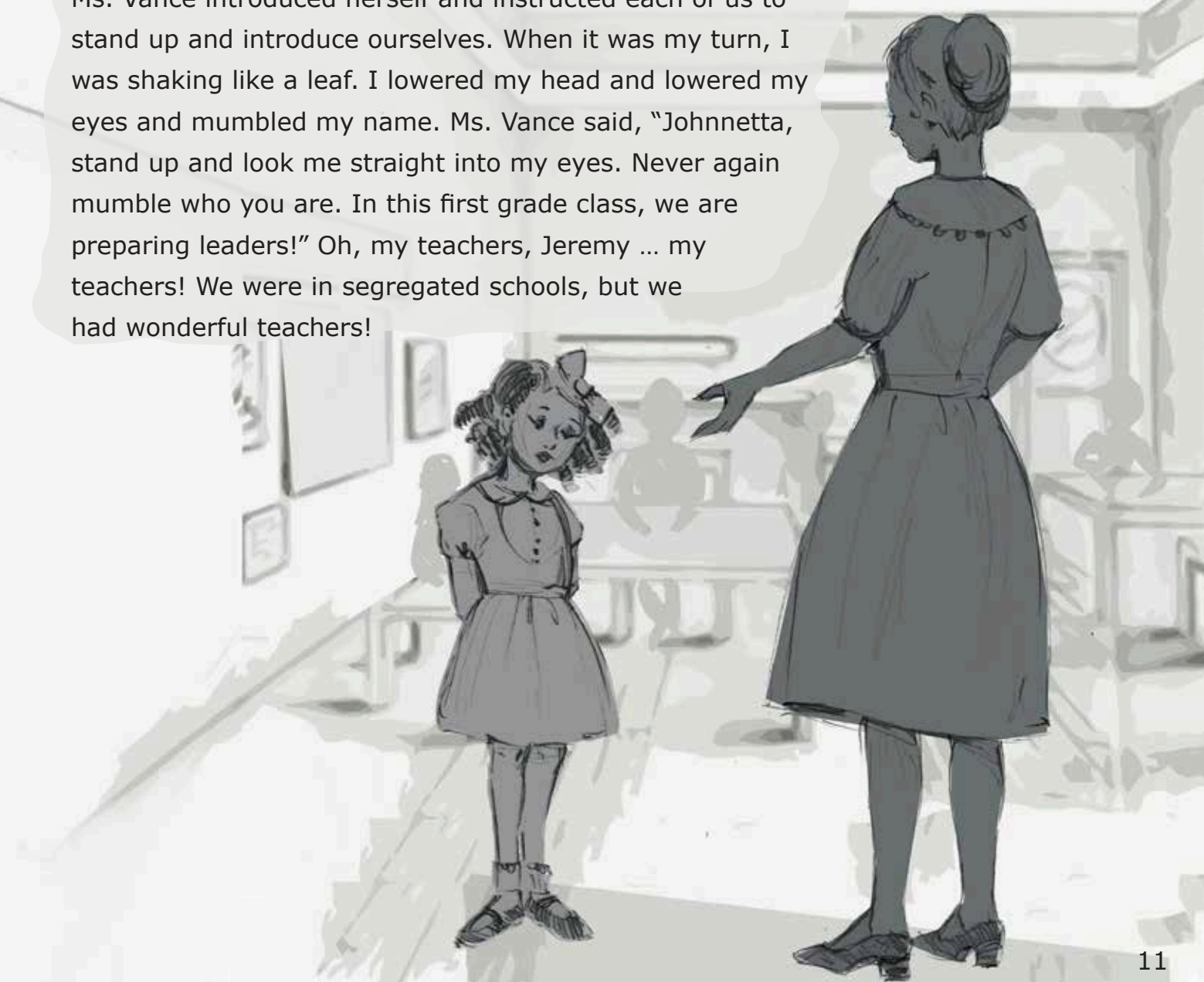
**My sister and me**



I went to College Park Elementary School when I was five years old.

I was so scared on the first day that I held on tightly to the hand of my best friend Bebe. (Bebe Ross Coker is still one of my besties).

Ms. Vance introduced herself and instructed each of us to stand up and introduce ourselves. When it was my turn, I was shaking like a leaf. I lowered my head and lowered my eyes and mumbled my name. Ms. Vance said, "Johnnetta, stand up and look me straight into my eyes. Never again mumble who you are. In this first grade class, we are preparing leaders!" Oh, my teachers, Jeremy ... my teachers! We were in segregated schools, but we had wonderful teachers!







**My grandfather and me**



**Oberlin College in Ohio**



Yes, you did! Please tell me about your grandparents and your parents and how they helped guide you, too.



My grandparents were James Henry Lewis and Bertha Elizabeth Lewis. I never knew my grandmother, but my grandfather was very important in my life. Here is a story about my grandfather who I called Papa. When I came home from Oberlin College, I went to see my grandfather and to tell him all about my experiences in college. He asked me this question: "So, baby girl, when will you



start to work in the family business?" I answered, "Oh Papa, I won't be working at the Afro-American Life Insurance Company. I'm going to be an anthropologist!" Papa said, "An anthropologist – what's that, baby girl?" I said, "Papa, I'm going to be an anthropologist like Margaret Mead, and go to different parts of the world to learn about and write about how people in those countries live." Papa started to laugh, and he said, "Baby girl! How are you going to make a living doing that?" Jeremy, I was so hurt by what my grandfather said, but I kept as calm as I could, said goodbye to my grandfather and went straight to find my mother.





What did you tell your mother?



With tears rolling down my cheeks, I said, "Mama, you won't believe what Papa said to me. He laughed at me when I said I want to be an anthropologist." My mother looked at me, and this is what she said, "I am a little disappointed in you for not understanding that because your grandfather never went to college, of course, he would not know what an anthropologist does. But hear me, my daughter, what your grandfather said is true. You do need to think about how you're going to make a living, especially because you are a young woman!" And then, Jeremy, listen to what my mother said next: "But if anthropology is your passion, you must follow it!"



Jeremy, I'm saying the same thing to you: Find your passion and then follow it.







**My mother**



**My sister and me**



**My father**



Thank you, Dr. Cole. I will. Tell me about your parents.



My parents were atypical for Southern Black people in the 1930s and 40s in that they were professionals with college degrees. My mother, Mary Frances Lewis Betsch, grew up in Jacksonville and went to Morris Brown College for high school and then Wilberforce College (now University), which was associated with the AME (American Methodist Episcopal) Church. My father, John Thomas Betsch, Sr.,

grew up in Henderson, North Carolina and attended Knoxville College in Tennessee. My mother was the registrar and taught at Edward Waters College (now University) in Jacksonville. My father began his career at the Afro-American Life Insurance Company, but before his untimely death in 1953, he was working in the business office at Howard University.





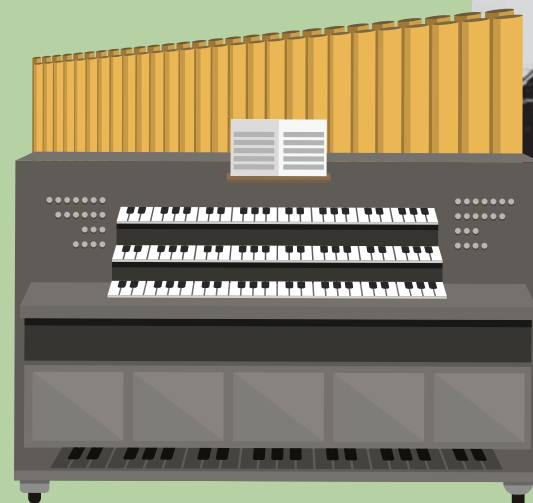
So, your parents, grandparents, great-grandparents and teachers were all your mentors, right?



Right, Jeremy. Our great-grandfather was a big influence in our lives. For fifty years, A. L. Lewis was the superintendent of the Sunday school at Mt. Olive AME Church on the Eastside of Jacksonville and that is where our family went to church. My sister and I went to Sunday school and church, and my mother played the organ and directed all of the choirs. But, after church was my favorite part of the



**Mt Olive AME Church**



**My great-grandfather's house on Sugar Hill**



week! We were finally on our way to Sunday dinner at our great-grandfather's house! But before dinner, my sister and I played one of the only two games our great-grandfather said we could play on a Sunday – school, or Sunday school. We played at our great-grandfather's desk, and he would check on us and ask us the same question every Sunday.



**My great-grandfather's desk**





What was his question?



"What are the three B's that you are going to live by?" The three Bs were the Bible, the school Book, and the bank Book – because A. L. Lewis said that to live a good life, you must follow the words of the Bible, you must get a good education, and you must work hard to save money so that you can be of service to others. So, Jeremy, as a little girl and always, I was taught that to be a leader, I must be of service to others.



© American Beach Museum



Speaking of service to others, I read that your great-grandfather was instrumental in establishing American Beach in 1935, the first African American beach in Florida.



Yes, Jeremy. Back in those days, Black people could not go to White people's beaches. As children, we spent many happy hours playing in the surf and sand dunes at American Beach. And today, my husband, James D. Staton, Jr. and I have a home in the American Beach community.





You have served others, too, Dr. Cole, as an anthropologist, educator, activist, author, college president and leader in our state, nation and world! You have done so much for so many. Do you remember when you first decided to go into anthropology (the study of human beings)?



That's a long story, Jeremy! When I was a child and people asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I always said I wanted to be a baby doctor. I even learned how to spell and pronounce the word pediatrician. Then, when I was at Oberlin College in Ohio, I took a class with Professor George Eaton Simpson and he talked



about cultural anthropology, the study of all the different people in the world. I got so excited! At the end of that class, I said, "Goodbye pediatrics – hello anthropology!" I wanted to be an anthropologist like Margaret Mead. Many years later, I learned about a great Black woman anthropologist named Zora Neale Hurston. She also grew up in Florida!





I read that you earned your masters and doctorate degrees in anthropology at Northwestern University and then went on to teach Black studies at Washington State University and anthropology at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. Later, you moved to Hunter College, where you directed Latin American and Caribbean studies.



Yes, I had a varied and rich career which led, in 1987, to my becoming the first Black woman president of Spelman College. After ten years at Spelman, I retired as president emerita in 1997.



But you didn't retire, Dr. Cole, did you?



No, Jeremy, I went on to teach at Emory University as a Presidential Distinguished Professor of Anthropology, Women's studies and African American studies. And then, from 2002 to 2007, I was president of Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina. There, I chaired the Johnnetta B. Cole Global Diversity and Inclusion Institute.





I read that you were director of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art from 2009-2017, Dr. Cole. I hope to go to the Smithsonian someday, and I will.



Yes, you will go there, Jeremy, because leaders can do anything they set their minds to and are willing to put in the work to accomplish. When I was your age, I was a reader like you are and I loved to read. My mother's best friend was Olga Bradham, the head librarian at the A. L. Lewis Public Colored Branch of the Library – yes, there were separate libraries for Black and White people back then. It made me

so happy when I walked into that library and Ms. Bradham was waiting for me with her desk stacked high with books for me to read. Jeremy, with those books, it was as if I could get on a magic carpet and the words would take me wherever I wanted to go in the world. Those were such happy times in my childhood!





Dr. Cole, you started school at 5 and then you went to Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee when you were just 15 ... you were a really smart student, weren't you?



Yes, Jeremy, and my parents insisted I go to Fisk because they loved education and loved me enough to want the best for me. At Fisk University I had wonderful, inspiring professors, and a great librarian, Arna Bontemps, who helped broaden my horizons.



Speaking of horizons, Dr. Cole, I read that you have received 70 honorary degrees, in addition to your many honors and awards.



**The Florida Times-Union**  
**Biden honors 'pretty cool'**  
**Jacksonville native with National**  
**Humanities Medal**  
*Jacksonville native, 86, still has 'work to do'*  
**Beth Reese Cravey**  
 Florida Times-Union  
 Published 2:00 p.m. ET March 24, 2023 | Updated 4:11 p.m. ET March 25, 2023



At 86, renowned educator, social activist and Jacksonville native Johnnetta Betsch Cole has received President Joe Biden has this year's most prestigious award.



Yes, I am grateful that my work has been recognized, Jeremy, and in March of this year, I was one of 12 recipients of the National Humanities Medal from President Biden. That was quite an honor.



I'm honored to be here in this library with you today, Dr. Cole.



**'That's what drives me':** At 85, Johnnetta Betsch Cole still pushing for social justice





The library is important, Jeremy, but I hope you enjoy being outside and playing, too. I often think about this – that children today spend so much time in front of the TV and computers and not enough time in healthy exercise outside. When we were girls playing outside our house on Louisiana Street on Jacksonville’s westside, I was the Double-Dutch jump rope champion extraordinaire, with two ropes going – jumping in and out! We also played hopscotch, drawing with chalk on the sidewalk. I was pretty good at that, too. If you want to be a leader, Jeremy, you’ve got to take care of your health – eat healthy foods, sleep well, and yes, exercise and enjoy fresh air!



**My husband James and me**



That’s good advice, Dr. Cole. Did you pass that on to your own children?



Yes, I did. My husband James (I call him J.D.) and I have four sons – David, Aaron, Ethan and Geoffrey, and four grandchildren, Marisa, 34, Hollis, 17, Miles, 12, and Trysten, 6. They all enjoy outside activities and reading, too! I loved reading to my sons – especially about Curious George, by Margaret and H. A. Rey. Being curious about everything helps you become a leader. There is no dumb question and there is nothing you don’t have a right to know.

**My sons**



**My grandson Trysten**



**Ethan, Aaron, David, Johnnetta, James, niece Peri, brother John, and Geoffry at our wedding in June 2007.**





Your words are so inspiring, Dr. Cole!



Thank you, Jeremy. I want you to do something for me – it's called a pinky promise. Stick out your pinky finger and I'll lock it with mine. Then we'll make a pinky promise to always stay curious and never stop being in love with books and learning. Let's promise to each continue being a leader in our own ways, to be of service to others and do whatever we can to make the world a better place.



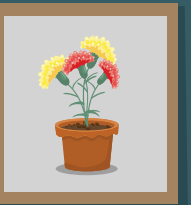
Thank you, Dr. Cole. I'll do my best, even though I'm so young.



Jeremy! Never think you're too young or small to make a difference! There is an African Proverb that says, "If you think you are too small to make a difference, you have never spent the night in a closed room with a mosquito!"



You are so much fun, Dr. Cole. I get it! I'm so glad that READ USA is encouraging me to search through Jacksonville for leaders like you! I love READ USA and all that it does for the students in Jacksonville, don't you?







Yes, I do, Jeremy. In fact, if I had a magic wand, I would clone READ USA and make many, many READ USAs and spread them around the world because I know the power that comes from learning to read. READ USA needs to be in every classroom everywhere because the sooner one learns to read, the better.



I agree, Dr. Cole. Thank you for your great words and for taking the time to speak with me today. You are one of the best leaders in the world!



Thank you, Jeremy, and I think you are surely one of the best young leaders in the world. Please stay curious and call me if you have any more questions.



I will, and here is a READ USA Certificate just for you, Dr. Cole.





**You are an inspiring leader, Dr. Cole.**  
And here's a special certificate from READ USA just for you!



**Watch for READ USA's  
Book of the Month  
for November 2023  
Volume 11  
when Jeremy's Journey  
through Jacksonville  
will take him  
to meet our next leader,  
The Honorable Warren A. Jones,  
Former City Councilman and  
Current Duval County  
Schoolboard Member**



## Dr. Cole's Five Leadership Tips

- ✓ Remember, you cannot lead where you won't go.
- ✓ Find your passion and follow it.
- ✓ As the African Proverb says about the importance of working together, if you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.
- ✓ Doing for others is just the rent you've got to pay for your room on earth.
- ✓ Just do your best!

## Vocabulary

**Social Justice Activist** – working to instill fairness and equality in society

**Superintendent** – a high-ranking person who manages an organization

**Registrar** – a person responsible for keeping official records

**Pediatrician** – a medical doctor specializing in children and their diseases

**Clone** – to make an exact genetic copy

## References for Research

Abraham Lincoln Lewis

A.L. Lewis Museum in the American Beach Community

Afro-American Life Insurance Co.

American Beach

Margaret Mead

Mt. Olive AME Church, Jacksonville

Smithsonian Institution

Zora Neale Hurston

Bennett College

Emory University

Fisk University

Hunter College

Northwestern University

Oberlin College

Spelman College

University of Massachusetts in Amherst

Washington State University

Wilberforce University



## ABOUT READ USA

**READ USA** began as a voluntary project created by Ellen Wiss and teacher Vanessa Tussey at George Washington Carver Elementary School in Duval County, Florida. While tutoring in Vanessa's classroom, Ellen witnessed the gains from some of the most struggling students. She became hopeful and passionate about expanding the impact for transformational change in one severely impoverished neighborhood and asked Vanessa what was needed most. Vanessa's response: "Books of interest to my students that inspire them to read, books they can choose and own. **Reading is key to all learning.**" They raised funds to hold a free, colorful book fair with thousands of new, popular and culturally sensitive titles that all students could choose from to build their home libraries. As demand and support grew, annual READ USA book fairs expanded to every public elementary school in Duval County as well as for younger children at other sites. READ USA is poised to serve throughout Florida and beyond.

In 2019, a grant from Jacksonville's Kids Hope Alliance enabled READ USA to pilot an intensive research-based Peer to Peer reading

tutoring intervention that provided jobs to teens with training, supervision and professional workforce development skills. One on one tutoring resulted in significant reading gains by both the teen tutors and the students they taught. Jacksonville University, University of North Florida, and Ohio State University have been evaluation partners to verify, document and assist with expansion of the program's evidence-based positive outcomes. READ USA has expanded this program year after year, now providing Teen Tutoring year-round.

**READ USA — *laser focused on closing the reading gap* —** opens pathways for children with book choice and ownership, peer to peer reading tutoring intervention, multi-cultural literacy programming, and professional literacy instruction development for educators. READ USA has evolved into a powerful force for positive change, impacting grade level reading proficiency, workforce development and building a diverse teacher pipeline, all with the goal of establishing an equitable and permanent culture of literacy for lifelong learning, social justice, freedom and prosperity.