

## **BOB GUTHRIE: THE MAIN MAN, AN AUTHENTIC BROTHER**

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According to a biographical sketch in the November 2001 edition of the *APA Monitor on Psychology*, Robert V. Guthrie is one of the most “talented, multi-dimensional African American psychologist of the epoch.”

His groundbreaking book, *Even the Rat Was White: A Historical View of Psychology*, published in 1976, was a catalyst in bringing into the mainstream of psychology the rich heritage of African American psychologists who were for the most part invisible in psychology. *Even the Rat Was White*, now in its second edition, was a testament to Black psychologists who conducted solid research often in racially segregated colleges with minimal resources and rigorously prepared young students like Bob Guthrie, who went on to distinguished careers in psychology. Brother Guthrie’s seminal book also brought to light the deep racism and ideas of White superiority deeply embedded in Euro-American psychology models of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Bob Guthrie and his twin brother were born in Chicago on February 14, 1930. Shortly thereafter, his father moved the family to Richmond, Kentucky, and later to Lexington, Kentucky, where he pursued a career as a high school principal and administrator in Kentucky’s segregated schools. In the South in the 1930s and 40s, racial segregation and oppression were part of the unchanging fabric of society. As a child and adolescent, Bob Guthrie was taught by Black teachers in Black schools. He went to Black churches, played with Black kids and, as a teenager, dated Black girls and danced Black dances. His parents and teachers demanded academic excellence as they tried to prepare African American children to be ready when the

walls of segregation would ultimately crumble. They taught Bob and his brother to keep the faith in their ultimate worth as human being, knowing they would have to work “twice as hard to make a way when there ain’t no way.”

At age 16, armed with a band scholarship, Bob Guthrie and his twin brother set off from Kentucky on a racially segregated train bound for Tallahassee, Florida, to attend Florida A&M College for Negroes and Colored students. His meager stipend allowed for only one meal a day, which he ate in segregated kitchens of White’s only restaurants. The brothers and sisters who worked in the White kitchens fed him all the soul food he could eat once a day and schooled him on the facts of life on how to survive and maybe even thrive as a Black man in America.

Brother Guthrie discovered a fascination with psychology in his introductory courses. Professor Joseph Awkard, an African American faculty member who had served in the Army overseas in World War II, challenged him to stretch his horizons and consider a career in psychology. Professor Awkard was the “bomb” as a teacher. He exposed his students to racial inequities in psychological testing, personality theories and conceptualizations of the “Negro Personality,” “Negro Self-Concept” and “Negro Intelligence,” which at the time were accepted views in traditional psychology. Bob Guthrie, the faculty and his fellow students went beyond standard psychological texts and journal articles by enriching their education with psychologically-oriented articles from African American periodicals like *Ebony*, *Crisis*, *Opportunity* and *Jet*.

Brother Guthrie’s undergraduate education was interrupted by military service in the United States Air Force during the Korean War. When he was stationed at Keesler Air Force Base in Mississippi, he met and married his future wife, Elodia Sanchez. Together they have

produced six very successful psychologically well-balanced children.

After completing his first tour of duty in the military, he returned to Florida A&M where he received his bachelor's degree in psychology in 1955. Brother Guthrie continued his education as a master's degree student in psychology at the University of Kentucky after the University was desegregated following the Brown v. Board of Education 1954 Supreme Court School Desegregation Case. His White professors were surprised to see a young African American male from "one of our Colored colleges." His parents' emphasis on discipline, excellence and hard work served him well at the newly desegregated university. He saw that he could compete and even excel in classrooms where he was the only Black student. He set his sights on obtaining a Ph.D. in psychology, which he received from United States International University in 1970.

While completing his master's degree, Dr. Guthrie enlisted for another tour of duty in the military. With the military's emphasis on desegregation and equality mandated by President Truman's executive order in 1948, the military was an environment where Dr. Guthrie felt a sense of respect and equal opportunity.

In a long and distinguished career, Dr. Guthrie has functioned effectively in all the major roles of a psychologist. He was Professor and Chair of the Behavioral Sciences Department at San Diego Mesa College, Associate Professor of Psychology and Director of the Urban Psychology Program at the University of Pittsburgh, Research Psychologist for the National Institute of Education in Washington, D.C. and a supervising research psychologist at the Naval Research and Development Center in San Diego. He was also a "lunch bucket" psychologist in the 1980s working in a community-oriented private practice with working class Black and

Hispanic clients in San Diego.

In the course of a career that has spanned over 40 years, Bob Guthrie has retired twice. After his first retirement in the early 1980s, he worked for a while as a “lunch bucket” psychologist in San Diego, walked the beaches near his second home in Baja California and reflected on a Black man’s life in America. He returned to work full time when Southern Illinois University honored him with an 8-year appointment as a full professor of applied experimental psychology in 1990. Now in his second retirement, he still teaches a course in African American psychology at San Diego State University.

In the spring of 2001, Dr. Guthrie was honored by The Archives of the History of American Psychology at the University of Akron (Akron, Ohio), where he is the first African American psychologist to deposit his papers, speeches, videos, manuscripts and other career memorabilia.

As he continues to teach, write, contemplate, “eat grits,” play his trumpet and walk the beaches of Baja, Dr. Guthrie often thinks about the heroes who inspired him: his parents, Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King and psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark, whose testimony was quoted by Chief Justice Earl Warren in the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education School Desegregation Decision. There is a cedar chest in his bedroom full of American flags symbolizing military service and contributions of many of his family members. He knows that he will meet them again some day after his flag is gently folded into the cedar chest by his children.

References:

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