



# Greats

*Felicenne Houston Ramey*

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## Greats Felicenne Houston Ramey

For many years, I collected art from the African diaspora. My interest and passion for the arts stemmed from my childhood visits to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. After retirement from academic and administrative positions at California State University, Sacramento, I expanded my interest to not only include the collection of art, but to the curation of art exhibits. In addition, I began photographing and recording the interesting lives of older African Americans. This latter interest surfaced when I became a grandmother. Almost all new grandparents become novice photographers and I was no exception.

As a frequent visitor to art exhibits, I was particularly struck by the lack of older African American people exhibited in the artwork. And since I was fast becoming one of them, I added photographing senior African Americans to my interest. As part of the photography sessions, I asked each of them to share their formula for long living. This resulted in my first published book titled, *Senior African Americans -They are Beautiful, Handsome and Wise* (available at blurb.com). In that book it is clear that many aged well. In addition, the seniors show wisdom about aging with grace.

As a result of the first book, I curated art exhibits of the photos and the associated wisdom at the California State Fair and the University Library Gallery at Sacramento State University. It was interesting and enlightening to see how young college students reacted to the age, beauty and wisdom of the seniors. Many saw the need to connect with their grandparents (if possible) and even made mention of their great-grandparents.

The students' comments inspired me to do a second project, this time with great-grandparents as my focus. During my research, I discovered Sir Sidney Poitier's book titled, *Life Beyond Measures: Letters to my Great Granddaughter*. His book prompted me to ask, "What advice do African American great-grandparents give to their great-grandchildren?" Clearly, parents give different advice to their progeny as the generations move forward. I hope this book provides some answers to the question.

Thus, I began my journey to find African American great-grandparents. Gathering the photographs for the book was quite different from my first one, because I wanted to photograph the great-grandparents with their great-grandchildren. The addition of children with the "Greats" in the photographs presented a challenge. Often it was necessary to travel to family gatherings where all parties would be present. In other cases, I had to obtain the photographs separately and then add them to the finished product. In those instances where very young children were involved, I had to move quickly before the little ones became too distracted.

The book presents thirty-seven great-grandparents in twelve states. Interestingly, twenty-one of the thirty-seven had college degrees-ten bachelor's, five master's and six doctorates.

The journey involved in putting this book together was wonderful, and the time I spent with the families featured on these pages was inspiring. I hope you think so too.

Enjoy

Felicenne H. Ramey

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