

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • CELEBRITY

Six Weeks That Became a Life

Dick Gregory, from the Playboy Club to the Front Lines

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Contribution Track • ERA VI–VII • St. Louis, Missouri

Who He Is

Richard Claxton Gregory was born October 12, 1932, in St. Louis, Missouri, and grew up in poverty before running track at Southern Illinois University and leaving before graduating to pursue comedy. In January 1961, Hugh Hefner hired him as a last-minute replacement at Chicago's Playboy Club — a room whose largely white, Southern-businessmen clientele had never seen a Black comedian perform pointed political and racial satire to their faces. What was booked as one night stretched into a six-week run that made him a national name almost overnight, carrying him onto Jack Paar's Tonight Show and into magazine profiles within weeks.

From the Stage to the Front Lines

Gregory converted that fame into full-time activism with striking speed. He spoke for two hours in Selma, Alabama, on October 7, 1963, ahead of a major voter-registration push, and in 1964 traveled to Neshoba County, Mississippi, after the disappearance of civil rights workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, confronting the local sheriff directly and announcing a \$25,000 reward, funded by Hugh Hefner, for information — a move credited with helping keep national media pressure on a case local authorities showed little urgency to solve. Over the following decades he conducted repeated hunger strikes tied to civil rights, the Vietnam War, and other causes, including a 1980 fast in Tehran during the Iran hostage crisis that left him weighing under one hundred pounds by the time he returned.

"People ask me about being a father and not being there. I say, 'Jack the Ripper had a father. Hitler had a father. Don't talk to me about family.'" — Dick Gregory, The Boston Globe, August 24, 2000

In 1968 he ran for president as a write-in candidate for the Freedom and Peace Party, with Dr. Benjamin Spock appearing as his running mate on some state ballots. His 1964 memoir, *Nigger: An Autobiography*, co-written with Robert Lipsyte, opened with a dedication to his mother that turned the book's title into an act of reclamation rather than provocation — a framing widely quoted in reviews of the book, though this entry has not independently confirmed its exact wording against a first printing.

A Complicated Later Chapter

Gregory's later decades were split between genuine continued activism — nutrition and health advocacy he explicitly framed as an extension of nonviolent philosophy, founding a company that developed a weight-loss formula reportedly used in 1985 Ethiopian famine relief — and a turn toward promoting discredited conspiracy theories, including claims that the Moon landing was faked and that the official account of the September 11 attacks was false, positions he aired repeatedly on The Alex Jones Show between 2010 and 2014. This entry states plainly that his substantial, well-documented civil rights record and these later claims are separate matters: the first is established history, the second is not factually supported and should not be presented as though it carried equal weight. He died August 19, 2017, in Washington, D.C., at eighty-four.

NC Local Lens

No documented connection between Dick Gregory and North Carolina, Fayetteville, or Cumberland County was found in this research pass. Given his decades-long national college-lecture circuit, which

included hundreds of American campuses, a Fayetteville State University appearance is plausible but entirely unconfirmed in the sources checked here. This entry claims no NC connection while flagging the gap as open — North Carolina newspaper archives and Fayetteville State's own event records were not accessible in this pass and should be checked before the question is considered settled.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

Memoir dedication quote: extremely widely repeated in reviews and secondary sources but not independently confirmed against a first-edition printing in this pass.

1968 write-in vote total: commonly cited at 47,097 nationally, sourced to a single elections-database aggregator — cross-check against a period newspaper tally before treating as precise.

Later-life conspiracy claims: presented here as documented things he said and did, not as credible claims — his civil rights record should never be diluted by or equated with this material.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. Dick Gregory, with Robert Lipsyte, *Nigger: An Autobiography* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1964).
2. Wil Haygood, "The Pain and Passion of Dick Gregory," *The Boston Globe*, August 24, 2000.
3. "Comic Withers Prejudice Clichés with Humor," *The New York Times*, March 20, 1961.
4. Dennis McLellan, "Dick Gregory, Who Rose from Poverty to Become Civil Rights Champion and Comedy Trailblazer, Dies at 84," *Los Angeles Times*, August 19, 2017.
5. Michael Carlson, "Dick Gregory Obituary," *The Guardian*, August 20, 2017.

Prepared by the Two Americas research process. Verify all figures against primary sources before publication if stronger originals become available.