

# Earnest Reese: A trailblazer who lived a full and exemplary life

2:52 pm April 5, 2012, by Mark Bradley

Earnest Reese's funeral was attended by a man who'd never met Earnest Reese but who, having met the son he raised and heard the son speak of the father, got on a plane in Los Angeles and wound up in McDonough, Ga., at 11 a.m. Wednesday. The traveler was J. Michael Ortiz, and he's the president of Cal Poly Pomona.

"I got the e-mail [regarding Reese's death last week] from Renford," Ortiz said, "and I thought, 'I need to be there.' "

(According to Renford Reese, the e-mail included a link [to our obit](#) and the message: "This is the man who molded me.")

Dr. Renford R. Reese, distinguished professor of political science, was Cal Poly Pomona's faculty member of the year in 2011. He played football and took his undergrad degree and his Masters at Vanderbilt; he earned his Ph.D from Southern Cal; he's an author and a playwright. He's also Earnest Reese's son, and here I'm going to stop referring to him as Earnest. Because none of us at the AJC ever called him that.

To us, he was "E." (Sometimes "Ernie," but mostly just "E.") We saw him as a colleague, but we knew him as a prince. When he arrived at the paper in 1974, he became the first black sportswriter at a major Southeastern daily, so automatically that made him a Big Deal. Thing was, E never acted like a big deal. The word "humility" was invoked at his funeral, and it was apt.

At his retirement ceremony in 2003, E claimed he'd never been a superstar among sportswriters — there were thousands of folks who followed the smaller colleges in this state who'd have disputed the point — but then gave the best description of what we do that this correspondent has ever heard. E loved getting up and coming to work, he said, because "we get to create something new every day." (And we do: Tomorrow's paper is never like yesterday's.)

Sportswriters tend to tick people off: Write something nice about one school and the rival school hates your guts. No one ever said an unkind word or held an unkind thought about E, and that includes the folks in the newsroom. Owing to our skeptical-by-training nature, we tend to nitpick everybody. Once in a great while there comes a person who transcends office pettiness. In our little shop, E was that person.

He was everything you'd want in a colleague — worked hard, knew his beat from stem to stern, took the job seriously but himself much less seriously — but there was far more to this man than ballgames and the coverage thereof. He had a full life away from work. From the testimonials offered Wednesday at Shiloh Baptist Church, you'd have thought E was the benevolent emperor of Henry County. From all accounts, he raised not just Renford and his sister Regina but half the kids of McDonough. He was mentor, coach, taskmaster, role model, big buddy.

It was another trailblazer who said he longed for the day when the content of one's character would be all that mattered. The content of E's character was such that he'd have become a pillar of any community on God's green Earth. His character was such that a busy man from the West Coast took time to come here — Renford was stunned to see him sitting in the back of the church — because he knew, just from knowing the son, that this was a life worth celebrating.

Mike Ortiz felt impelled to fly cross-country to learn a little more about the man. We at the AJC were luckier. We got to see Earnest Reese every working day. By knowing E, we were ennobled.

**By Mark Bradley**

**Tweet**

**38 comments**

**Add your comment**

**Kobe**

April 5th, 2012 3:07 pm

Excellent article and very well said.

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

### **Shug**

April 5th, 2012 3:14 pm

Thanks for the reminder of Earnest Reese. Growing up in the 70s in Stone Mountain, he was one of the newspaper voices of my youth. R.I.P.

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

### **buster brave**

April 5th, 2012 3:43 pm

I remember being informed of the small black colleges and their sports programs and for a white sports fan was a new,informative,important segment of a knowledgeable sports fan's repertoire.During my life have with the giants of our society; MLK jr., JFK,RFK and i believe Mr. Reese exemplified the best of these leaders.Thanks Mr. Reese for opening a new world of sports to me,and all the work you did that had nothing to do with sports. We need more men like Mr Ernest Reese, RIP.

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

### **todd grantham**

April 5th, 2012 4:02 pm

Great piece Mark. I remember when we could get the AJC in the boonies and i enjoyed reading Mr. Reese's articles on the smaller schools in metro ATL.

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

### **Iceman**

April 5th, 2012 4:05 pm

Thanks for giving Mr. Reese the honor and reverence he is due. He always garnered respect from everyone especially the young people he served. I

still remember cooking hotdogs at his house, attending birthday parties and playing basketball in his yard. Being from McDonough and having the opportunity to work with young people on a daily basis I realize how blessed I am to have grown up around positive BLACK MEN like Mr. Reese....

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

**sansho1**

April 5th, 2012 4:08 pm

Man, first Furman and now Earnest. Tough couple of weeks at the AJC. RIP

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

**Iceman**

April 5th, 2012 4:17 pm

Lastly, we didn't have a lot of professionals to emulate that were not educators in McDonough so Mr. Reese serving in the capacity that he served gave us a sense of pride. I recall being jealous of Knuck because he was always meeting the famous athletes of the day and it seems like he went to all of the pro games. Whether it was to Dr. J, Hank Aaron or anybody else that Mr. Reese was interviewing, I always thought his dad was the coolest.... RIP Mr. Reese

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

**Iceman**

April 5th, 2012 4:19 pm

Lastly, we didn't have a lot of professionals to emulate that were not educators in McDonough so Mr. Reese serving in the capacity that he served, gave us a sense of pride. I recall being jealous of Knuck because he was always meeting the famous athletes of the day and it seems like he went to all of the pro games. Whether it was to Dr. J, Hank Aaron or anybody else that Mr. Reese was interviewing, I always thought his dad was the coolest.... RIP Mr. Reese

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

**angel medina**

April 5th, 2012 4:28 pm

As one of the many of Dr. Renford R. Reese's friends, the insight on his father was greatly appreciated, wonderful words Mr. Bradley

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

**defactodawg**

April 5th, 2012 4:28 pm

Mark,

Another great tribute to a fine writer. Despite the difficulty, you seem at your best when remembering those who left such a strong impression on you and your career.

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

**GTT**

April 5th, 2012 4:40 pm

As a Ga. Southern grad, I loved that he covered us. We were lucky.

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

**Pat Donahue**

April 5th, 2012 4:42 pm

It was my pleasure to share the press box with Earnie on countless Saturday afternoons in Statesboro and other locales across the Southeast. Nothing made me happier than to know I'd be sitting next to or near E for several hours watching college football. He was a great colleague and an even better man.

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

**Pat Donahue**

April 5th, 2012 4:50 pm

As much as sportswriters of my generation and background wanted to write and live like Grizzard, I also wanted to treat people the way E treated the people around him.

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

**Jerry Grillo**

April 5th, 2012 5:14 pm

Very nice tribute, Mark. E was certainly one of the greats, and that comes across in your column.

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

**markie mark**

April 5th, 2012 5:21 pm

from someone who never knew him, I feel a profound sense of loss reading about him and wish I had. Condolences to his friends and family.....

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

**BravesFan79**

April 5th, 2012 5:25 pm

Rip, sounds like the world needs more men like Mr Reese.

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

**Macy Wolfe**

April 5th, 2012 6:11 pm

I love how the AJC has not a single editorial or article about the on-going bigotry at Augusta National. You crackers cling to your hatreds hard, I take it.

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

**Eric**

April 5th, 2012 6:25 pm

It was big of you to be at the services yesterday Mr. Bradley. It was huge for you to write this column. Thanks for remembering a trailblazer!

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

**Jacket fan in Wisconsin**

April 5th, 2012 6:32 pm

Nice tribute, Mark. As a Georgian by birth, now living up north, I really appreciate how good men like Mr Reese are being seen as just that.....GOOD MEN.....without regard to their race. Georgia and the South have come a long way in that regard. It's the way it should be, IMO.

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

**JSS**

April 5th, 2012 7:34 pm

Small colleges and the people who follow all of those schools not on the so-called front page were served well by Mr. Reese. His stories on the "Two Atlantas" were the stuff of legend. May he continue to be remembered for being a journalist of the first rank! Thank you for writing about him for the many who never had the pleasure of meeting him or reading his works

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

**Mark Bradley**

April 5th, 2012 8:22 pm

Thanks to all for the kind words. If you were lucky enough to have known E, you knew all this already.

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

### **The Duke**

April 5th, 2012 9:00 pm

I read his articles anytime I could get access to an Atlanta paper while growing up in Irwin County. Earnest was an astute, thorough and very seasoned sports writer who I admired immensely. His work at The Atlanta Journal-Constitution inspired a young black male like me to pursue a degree in journalism at Georgia Southern. I think we can all agree that His sports coverage gave legitimacy to media starved HBCU programs and other small colleges throughout the state. Rest in Peace Earnest.

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

### **Blue Eagle**

April 5th, 2012 9:37 pm

As a Ga. Southern alumnus living in Charleston, SC I always looked forward to reading Mr. Reese's articles about the Eagles. His articles were not only interesting but informative. Because they were very professionally written I always felt I could trust the information in them. Ga. Southern was fortunate to have him covering the Eagles! Thank you, Mr. Reese, for all the great articles you wrote about my "beloved" Ga. Southern Eagles!.

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

### **Guerry Clegg**

April 5th, 2012 11:00 pm

Beautiful portrait of a wonderful man.

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

### **Tucker**

April 6th, 2012 6:02 am

Mr. Reese was a great media friend of Georgia State athletics as well. He told the story of Panther basketball to the AJC readership during the Lefty era. He made the players and coaches the center of attention, never himself. He was like a good basketball official who calls a game so

exceedingly well, that you hardly notice he is on the court during the game, but say afterwards, "Now that was a well called basketball game." Thank you, Mr. Reese.

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

**B**

April 6th, 2012 6:32 am

Good column. Thank you for sharing.

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

**Stockbridge Tiger**

April 6th, 2012 7:37 am

Growing up in the south in the early 60s I never met very many educated black men. I had been around a lot of black men in hay fields of the surrounding communities working on the little farms but that was about it. The first day my school desegregated I remember walking out on the football field for PE and seeing a young black man throwing the football all the way across the field to a bunch of kids. Man, he had a gun and I hollered hit me! Hit me! Well he did, a strike from across the field, I still feel the thump it made when it hit me in the chest. The new PE coach turned out to be Mr. Reese and over the next few years, I grew not only to respect his athletic abilities but the manner in which he carried himself. He was confident and reassuring which went along way in helping a young, mixed up boy growing up during that time. We debated everything, the latest superstar, which teams would win the championships and to why people were rioting in the streets. I watch him in our class room; administer discipline in fair and equal way. He had his faults, I just don't remember them. In later years, I remember he was quick to smile and his good natured kidding. Always wanting to know what I was doing to improve myself. I was especially glad to see him go to work for the AJC. I could sort of keep up with him through his articles which I always enjoyed reading.

I just want to say "thank you" for everything Coach Reese! You help me a lot.

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

**Cedric McCollins**

April 6th, 2012 8:05 am

Thanks Mr. Bradley, What a great tribute to Mr. Reese, I thoroughly enjoyed reading his sports articles over the 90's as well. He had great insight in covering the small colleges and especially HBCU's as he was a product. I'm also an Alcorn State alum and native Mississippian as Mr. Reese and stand proud to say our paths did cross. I will always remember him and esteem his work highly among all sports writers. Mr. Reese ("E") as you all referred to him seemed to embody the character that is still very much needed today. Thanks for all he done, RIP, Cedric McCollins

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

**zgoldatl**

April 6th, 2012 8:48 am

Well written, Mr. Bradley. Sorry for your loss. RIP Mr. Reese

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

**JackDennis**

April 6th, 2012 9:11 am

Good work, Bradley

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

**Bill**

April 6th, 2012 9:20 am

Sounds like a special man. Mark you are at your best when writing these pieces.

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

**\*\*Frederick(Bailey)Douglass\*\***

April 6th, 2012 9:59 am

Nice Article...RIP Reese

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

**John**

April 6th, 2012 10:48 am

I always enjoyed his writing, especially in the way he covered Georgia Southern during the national championship days. I still read the AJC every day but miss the days when you had writers like Earnest Reese and others who covered and wrote about every important college football game in the South every week. What a gret day it would be to bring those days back!

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

**Jim**

April 6th, 2012 11:05 am

Growing up in Atlanta with a newspaper at the breakfast table every morning I read Earnest Reese columns a lot. Kind of thought he was my cousin (same last name, not related). He and the late Chico Renfroe and late Joe Walker made my late father and I day. I missed the coverage of the small schools in and around Georgia. Earnest Reese will be missed.

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

**Dr. Warren**

April 6th, 2012 11:25 am

This is a touching and inspiring story. Earnest Reese wrote compelling columns that I read when i was a kid. His son, who earned his Ph.D from USC, where I also earned a graduate degree and taught for several years, is a testament to his father's values and kind soul. (And MB, very well-written tribute, as always, but the official name of our school for the past couple of decades has been USC, not Southern Cal).

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

**exileonmainstreet**

April 6th, 2012 1:51 pm

Thanks to Stockbridge Tiger for a great tribute. Earnest Reese was a very special man. He was an exemplary teacher and coach who always seemed to know if the situation called for a pat on the back or a kick in the rear. I always sought out his work in the AJC even if I was not particularly interested in the subject matter.

Mr. Reese was quite the athlete. I vividly remember seeing him during wind sprints at the end of football practice for the eighth grade team. He would stand about five yards downfield then blow the whistle and commence to back peddle. I never saw anyone catch him.

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

**lovejones4**

April 6th, 2012 2:58 pm

A great guy to share the pressbox with! You would be informed and also share some great laughs. I looked up to Reese and admired him greatly. R.I.P., warrior!

[Link](#)

[Report this comment](#)

**Georgia Southern Alum**

April 6th, 2012 10:38 pm

Fantastic tribute Mark! I had the honor of meeting Mr. Reese while he was covering Georgia Southern in the early 1990s. I was an intern working the games and he was always very nice and easy to talk to. I am very sad to hear of his death and I know the AJC has lost a great writer. Thanks for sharing that.