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Susan L. Taylor

**Founder & CEO, National CARES Mentoring Movement
and Editor-in-Chief Emeritus of *Essence* Magazine**

Biography

After 27 years as the chief editor of *Essence* magazine and the visionary credited with building the brand, Susan L. Taylor left publishing to devote her life to building an organization that is devoted to breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty among African Americans. The National CARES Mentoring Movement is that organization: a community transformation crusade dedicated to “changing the predictable futures defined for our young who are struggling along the margins and living with the indignity of poverty,” she says.

Founded by Susan Taylor in 2005 as Essence CARES, the National CARES Mentoring Movement is the fastest growing mentor-recruitment organization in the nation. In 58 U.S. cities, local CARES Affiliates recruit, train and deploy caring adults to schools and a wide variety of youth-serving organizations that are desperate for Black volunteers to serve as mentors, tutors, reading buddies and role models. Big Brothers Big Sisters, the Boys and Girls Clubs of America, Boy Scouts and U.S. Dream Academy are among the hundreds of organizations for which the CARES volunteer army of passionate CARES Affiliate leaders recruit mentors. To date, National CARES has recruited more than 130,000 mentors.

MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership has determined that there are three million children engaged in formal mentoring programs in the United States, but that 15 million more children are in need of mentoring services. The lack of mentors is especially acute for Black children, who by every measure are at the bottom of the academic-achievement ladder. Black youngsters’ reading scores have fallen behind those of Latino children for whom English is a second language. Deepening her commitment to create pathways out of poverty that equip children with the confidence, well-being and skills they must have to succeed, Susan Taylor is leading National CARES in taking a bold leap forward. “Linking arms and aims,” she says, “we fortunate ones can end the dream-crushing pain that is limiting the lives of millions of our nation’s children, trapped in unstable communities, fractured families and under-resourced schools. With the support of private and corporate foundations, federal agencies and individual donors, CARES is piloting transformational group-mentoring programs designed to serve the multitudes of children in need of social, emotional and academic support, and more loving adults in their lives. Culturally rich and curriculum-based, these group-mentoring trainings, called *The Rising*, are “designed to ‘reculture’ our young,” says Taylor, “to help struggling students and youngsters returning from incarceration to discover the innate genius that is inherent in us all. We want them to aim high and graduate from high school prepared for college or high-skills vocational training and 21st-century careers.”



In 2009 Taylor formed a brain trust of nationally renowned educators, community activists, business and faith leaders, physicians, psychologists, nutritionists. Their charge was to bring their best thinking to moving what is most needed for African Americans to move to wellness in body, mind, spirit and community. *A New Way Forward: Healing What's Hurting Black America* was the outcome, an initiative and training manual for mentoring our young and healing communities. Today, those bold, innovative strategies provide the framework for the CARES mentor trainings and *The Rising* programs, which are being piloted in select cities and at Clark Atlanta University for replication throughout the nation. The programs are having a quantitative and lasting impact on the lives of young people and the adults who parent and mentor them.

"Not to participate as a mentor, vocal advocate or financial contributor to the recovery of children struggling in stressed families and unstable communities," Susan Taylor says, "is to betray our foreparents. No matter where they came from or how they arrived on these shores, their sacrifices and ideals brought us to this place of privilege."

Susan Taylor's vision is clear: calling together a critical mass of caring people to work strategically, peacefully and passionately to heal all that is hurting our children, communities and country. No partisan politics, no egos, she says. "This is about creating what we sing and say we are—America the Beautiful, a nation in which all children and families have opportunities to thrive." This is a vision that builds on her nearly four decades of groundbreaking work in publishing.

At *Essence* magazine, Taylor not only served as chief editor, but also authored the magazine's most popular column, *In the Spirit*—the first in a mainstream U.S. magazine to champion spiritual growth as a pathway to total well-being and a meaningful life. Under her guidance, the publication's readership soared to eight million in the U.S., the Caribbean, Canada, the U.K. and English-speaking Africa nations, and the *Essence* brand expanded into book publishing, broadcasting, eyewear, hosiery and its own fashion catalogue. But nowhere outside the magazine did she bring people and Black culture together so beautifully as with the launching of the *Essence* Music Festival and its famous empowerment seminars.

Taylor says her genius is her faith in the goodness of life, her trust in synchronicity and a knowing so deep that when we strive to be kind and loving and true to our purpose, which is to care "for the least of these" and leave our world better than we found it, everything we need to succeed in doing the work of life is given us."

Taylor's genius has not gone unrecognized. She is the first and, sadly, she laments, the only African American woman to be recognized by the Magazine Publishers of America with the Henry Johnson Fisher Award—the industry's highest honor—and the first to be inducted into the American Society of Magazine Editors Hall of Fame. She is the recipient of scores of prestigious awards, including presidential citations, Image Awards and the NAACP President's Award for Visionary Leadership, and has honorary doctorate degrees from more than a dozen colleges and universities.



Susan Taylor is a fourth-generation entrepreneur. She grew up in Harlem, working in her father's clothing store, Larry's Specialty Shop. She founded her own cosmetics company at 23 years old, a first of its kind for Black women, which led to the beauty editor's position at *Essence*. It is this enterprising spirit, wedded to a deep love for her community, that led to the founding of the National CARES Mentoring Movement, where she serves as its volunteer CEO. This work, she says today, is her highest calling. When Susan Taylor learned that 80 percent of Black fourth graders were reading below grade level, she handed the reins to the next generation of editors and left *Essence* to concentrate fully on building National CARES.

A lifelong activist, she has worked with Danny Glover and Shared Interest to secure micro loans for rural Black South Africans; with hard-hit communities and policymakers in the Gulf Coast to help in the recovery effort in the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita; on behalf of the restoration of Haiti and on a host of other social-justice issues.

Susan L. Taylor is the editor of eight books, and the author of four books: the best-seller *In the Spirit, Lessons in Living*; *Confirmation: The Spiritual Wisdom That Has Shaped Our Lives*, which she co-authored with her husband, Khephra Burns; and her most recent book, *All About Love*. She is a much sought-after speaker, inspiring hope and encouraging us to reclaim our lives and empower leaders who are devoted to creating peace, top-tier schools and safe, self-sustaining communities.