

Medgar Wiley Evers

Visionary - Soldier - Citizen and American Hero

"Let men of good will and understanding change the old order, for this is a new day"

-Medgar Evers, April 20, 1961

Medgar Wiley Evers was a pioneering visionary for civil rights from the end of World War II until his June 12, 1963, assassination in Jackson, Mississippi. As the state's first field secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, he was one of the most visible leaders in the civil rights movement in America. His assassination cemented President John F. Kennedy's belief in a comprehensive civil rights bill, which was signed into law the following year by President Lyndon Johnson.

Early Life

Evers was born July 2, 1925, in Decatur, Miss., where his father worked in lumber and his mother did domestic work for white families. He joined the U.S. Army in 1943 and was a part of the famous Red Ball Express, which hauled supplies to Allied forces following the D-Day invasion in Normandy. The work of Evers and other African American soldiers proved critical to the success of Allied troops as they swept across France into Germany, leading to the defeat of the Nazis.

Civil Rights

After fighting the Nazis an ocean away, Medgar Evers returned home to Mississippi to fight racism all over again that barred African Americans from voting booths, from restaurants, even from restrooms. On his 21st birthday in 1946, he and other World War II veterans, including his brother, Charles, tried to vote in the courthouse in Decatur — only to be turned away by an armed white mob. Historians point to this simple act as the start of the modern civil rights movement in Mississippi; veterans and their families raising up in rebellion against second-class citizenship.

College Days

Medgar Evers continued his activism as he began attending what is now Alcorn State University in Lorman, Miss., in 1948. During his senior year, he married a fellow student, Myrlie Beasley, and they later had three children: Darrell, Reena and James Van.

Working in the Delta

After graduation, Medgar Evers sold insurance in the Mississippi Delta and did what he could to improve the lives of sharecroppers, helping them to escape when it became too dangerous. He worked for Dr. T.R.M. Howard, who headed the civil rights group, the Regional Council of Negro Leadership. Evers spearheaded the group's boycott, passing out bumper stickers that read, "Don't Buy Gas Where You Can't Use the Restroom."

The University of Mississippi

In January 1954, Medgar Evers applied to the University of Mississippi School of Law, which made him the first African American to attempt to enter the school. Rejected because of the color of his skin, he talked with NAACP leaders and attorney Thurgood Marshall about filing a challenge against the university. The more NAACP leaders spoke with Evers, the more impressed they became. They talked to him about becoming the Mississippi NAACP's first field secretary. He accepted.

Investigation of killings

Months after being rejected by Ole Miss, Medgar Evers became the first state field secretary of the NAACP in Mississippi. He traversed the state, investigating burnings, beatings, killings and other violence during the civil rights movement and documenting what he found in reports. He also led voter-registration efforts, demonstrations and economic boycotts against companies that practiced discrimination. Because of his work, members of the Ku Klux Klan put him on their "death list."

Emmett Till

Medgar Evers investigated the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old African-American youth from Chicago who was killed by a mob of white men after he allegedly wolf-whistled at a white woman in Money, Miss. An all-white jury acquitted Till's two killers after deliberating only an hour. Months later, they admitted they had killed Till. Days after the acquittal, Rosa Parks boarded a bus in Montgomery, Ala., and refused to give up her seat to a white man, sparking the modern civil rights movement in America.

Bus Integration

In 1958, Medgar Evers attempted to integrate a Jackson-bound bus departing from Meridian, Miss. After police officers removed him from the front seat, Evers boarded again, only to be assaulted by a white cab driver who had forced his way onto the bus. Despite the violence, he returned and sat in the front of the bus all the way back to Jackson.

Clyde Kennard

Medgar Evers protested the conviction of his fellow Mississippi civil rights activist, Clyde Kennard, on theft charges in 1960. Kennard had unsuccessfully sought admission to the segregated Mississippi Southern College (now the University of Southern Mississippi) before being arrested for allegedly stealing chicken feed. Evers publicly denounced the trial as a mockery of justice after an all-white jury deliberated only 10 minutes before convicting Kennard, leading a judge to find Evers in contempt. Evers won on appeal and eventually won Kennard's freedom in January, 1963 six months before Kennard died of cancer. In 2006, a judge exonerated Kennard after the man who stole the feed admitted that Kennard had done no wrong.

COFO

Medgar Evers formed the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) in the spring of 1961 with Aaron Henry, Mississippi state NAACP president; Carsie Hall, a civil-rights lawyer practicing in Mississippi, and others to facilitate a meeting with Gov. Ross Barnett to secure the release of incarcerated Freedom Riders.

NAACP Youth

Medgar Evers helped organize and revive NAACP branches across Mississippi. He also worked to promote and encourage the involvement of younger activists in NAACP Youth Councils. The inclusion of youth, he believed, was critical to a winning strategy in the crusade against Jim Crow. In several areas of the state — Jackson, Meridian, McComb and Vicksburg most notably — NAACP Youth Councils emerged and were quite active. Statewide membership in NAACP chapters nearly doubled between 1956 and 1959 from about 8,000 to 15,000 dues-paying activists.

Tougaloo Nine

Medgar Evers promoted acts of passive resistance by African Americans to end segregation in Mississippi. He staged sit-ins at public libraries and parks, on buses and at lunch counters. He helped organize the March 27, 1961, "read-in" at the whites-only Jackson Municipal Public Library. The protesters included nine African-American students who were members of the Tougaloo College NAACP Youth Council. Known as the Tougaloo Nine, the group entered the segregated main branch of the municipal library in search of source material for a class assignment. When the students took seats, and began reading, a library staff member called the police. After refusing orders by the police chief to leave the library, the Tougaloo Nine were arrested. The read-in drew support from students at Jackson and Tougaloo Colleges as well as the

predominantly white Millsaps College. While waiting for a court hearing for the Tougaloo Nine to end inside, Jackson police turned their dogs loose on Evers and others and began to beat the civil rights leader.

Tragic Death and its Aftermath

Medgar Evers became a target for those who opposed racial equality and desegregation. He and his family were subjected to numerous threats and violent actions over the years, including a firebombing of their house in May 1963. Civil rights demonstrations accelerated in Jackson during the first week of June 1963. The FCC ordered LBT to grant Evers equal time for a short speech, his first in Mississippi, where he outlined the goals of the Jackson movement. Following the speech, threats on Evers' life increased. At 12:40 a.m. on June 12, 1963, Evers was shot in the back in the driveway of his home in Jackson. He died less than an hour later at a nearby hospital.

He was buried with full military honors in Arlington National Cemetery, and the NAACP posthumously awarded him their 1963 Spingarn Medal. The national outrage over his assassination increased support for what became the Civil Rights Act of 1964. A police and FBI investigation of the murder quickly unearthed a prime suspect: Byron De La Beckwith, a segregationist and leader in Mississippi's white Citizens Council. Despite mounting evidence against him his rifle found near the murder scene, his fingerprint on the scope, and several witnesses placing him in the area- Beckwith denied shooting Evers. He claimed the gun had been stolen, and two police officers testified they saw him in Greenwood the night of the murder. He received support from many prominent citizens, including former Gov. Ross Barnett, a segregationist politician who shook hands with Beckwith in full view of the jury. In 1964, after two all-white juries deadlocked, Beckwith was set free.

After Beckwith's second trial, Myrlie Evers moved with her children to California, where she earned a degree from Pomona College and was later named to the Los Angeles Commission of Public Works. Convinced that her husband's killer had not been brought to justice, she continued to search for new evidence in the case.

In 1989, she asked for the Hinds County District Attorney's office to reopen the case after The Clarion-Ledger revealed that while Mississippi was prosecuting Beckwith for her husband's murder, another arm of the state, a segregationist spy agency known as the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission, was secretly assisting the defense, trying to get him acquitted.

Before 1990 ended, a Hinds County grand jury indicted Beckwith for the murder of Medgar Evers. Beckwith fought extradition and made several appeals before finally standing trial in 1994 when a diverse jury convicted Beckwith, who was sentenced to life in prison. He died in prison in 2001.

Medgar Evers' contributions have been honored in many public ways. In Jackson, Mississippi, the downtown post office building, a public library, a major thoroughfare, and the Jackson-Medgar Wiley Evers International Airport all proudly bear his name. Medgar Evers College, part of the City College of New York college system, salutes his life and work. On November 12, 2011, the U.S.N.S. Medgar Evers was christened as the first naval ship bearing the name of a civil rights leader. The seal of the U.S.N.S. Medgar Evers bears these words: **COURAGE; INTEGRITY; PERSERVERANCE.**

“Although great strides in the field of human relations have been made, we cannot let up now”

-Medgar Evers, April 20, 1961