

forgiveness for a change



MEDGAR EVERS

1925-1963

Civil rights leader
assassinated,
Jackson, Miss.

By the time Medgar Evers was 28, he had lost a family friend to a lynch mob. He had been turned away from a voting place by a gang of armed white men. He had been denied admission to a Mississippi law school because he was black. Nevertheless, Medgar Evers loved Mississippi. He fought in World War II for the United States, "including Mississippi," he told people. And he returned from overseas with a commitment to steer his home state toward civilization.

That determination and a great deal of personal courage would carry him through many trials during the next nine years. Evers became the first NAACP Field Secretary for Mississippi, and he spent much of 1955 investigating racial killings. Evers' research on the murders of George Lee, Lamar Smith, Emmett Till and others was compiled in a nationally distributed pamphlet called *M is for Mississippi and for Murder*.

There was immense danger and little glory attached to civil rights work in Mississippi — even for the NAACP's highest state official. Medgar Evers was the one who arranged the safe escape of Mose Wright after the elderly black man risked death to testify against the white killers of Emmett Till. It was Medgar Evers who counseled James Meredith through the gauntlet of white resistance when Meredith became the first black person to enroll at the University of Mississippi. When there were no crises to respond to, there were long hours on the road, organizing NAACP chapters.

In the spring of 1963, Evers

was living in Jackson, leading a drive for fair employment and integration against a stubborn city government. When Evers sent a list of black demands to Mayor Allen C. Thompson, the mayor replied in a televised speech to Blacks: "You live in a beautiful

to civil rights demands. On May 28, an integrated group of students sat quietly at a white lunch counter while white thugs assaulted them, sprayed them with paint and poured counter condiments on their heads. A photo of the incident was pub-



RIGHT
Mourners walk in a funeral procession for Medgar Evers in Jackson, Miss.

OPPOSITE PAGE
The body of Medgar Evers was laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery on June 19, 1963. Myrlie Evers and two of her three children, Darrell Kenyatta, 9, and Reena Denise, 7, are seated at right.

city, where you can work, where you can make a comfortable living ... do not listen to false rumors which will stir you, worry you and upset you..."

The mayor's speech only angered Blacks more. The television station granted Evers equal airtime. "History has reached a turning point, here and over the world," Evers said. He compared black life in Jackson to the lives of black Africans. "Tonight, the Negro knows ... about the new free nation in Africa and knows that a Congo native can be a locomotive engineer, but in Jackson he cannot even drive a garbage truck..."

The bold speech made Evers the focus of racial tensions in the city. Young Blacks became more impatient as city officials stubbornly refused to listen

lished nationwide, and Mayor Thompson was suddenly forced to negotiate with black leaders. During the series of meetings and demonstrations that followed, Medgar Evers became a hero to Blacks in Jackson and a mortal enemy to many Whites.

TENSIONS RISE

As the momentum of the movement increased, so did the threat of violence. A Molotov cocktail was thrown at Evers' house. Student demonstrators were beaten by police. So many protesters were arrested that the state fair-ground had to be turned into a detention camp. Evers spent day and night in negotiations and strategy sessions, seeking desperately to avoid violence.

Then, on the night of June 12, 1963, President Kennedy

delivered his strongest message ever on civil rights. "We face ... a moral crisis as a country and a people," Kennedy said. "A great change is at hand, and our ... obligation is to make that revolution, that change, peaceful and constructive for all."

Evers watched the presidential address with other NAACP officials. Greatly encouraged, they held a strategy session lasting late into the night. When Evers finally arrived home, it was late. He pulled into his driveway, gathered up a pile of NAACP T-shirts reading "Jim Crow Must Go," and got out of his car.

Myrlie Evers had let her children wait up for their father that night. They heard his car door slam. "And in that same instant, we heard the loud gunfire," Mrs. Evers recalled. "The

the hospital, but he was dead within an hour after the shot.

The next morning, police discovered a small clearing in a patch of honeysuckle near the house. On the ground nearby lay a high-powered rifle with a telescopic sight. An FBI investigation later showed the fingerprints on the rifle belonged to Byron De La Beckwith, a charter member of the White Citizens' Council. Beckwith was tried twice for murder in 1964 but both cases ended in hung juries.

Beckwith spent the next 30 years a free man. Then, in 1990, prosecutors uncovered new evidence against him and brought Beckwith to trial for a third time. This time, on February 5, 1994, Beckwith was convicted of murdering Medgar Evers and was sentenced to life in prison. He died in 2001.

them to remain calm and to continue the struggle her husband died for.

Others were unable to contain their anger. On June 15, after more than 5,000 people had gathered in silent tribute to Evers, a group of black youths began marching in defiance of a court order. Police and fire engines confronted them on a downtown street, and the youths began throwing rocks. Several police officers drew their pistols. John Doar, a Justice Department lawyer who had come to attend Evers' funeral, knew there was going to be a riot unless someone acted quickly. Doar walked in between the police and demonstrators and urged the youths to turn back. They obeyed, and there was no violence.

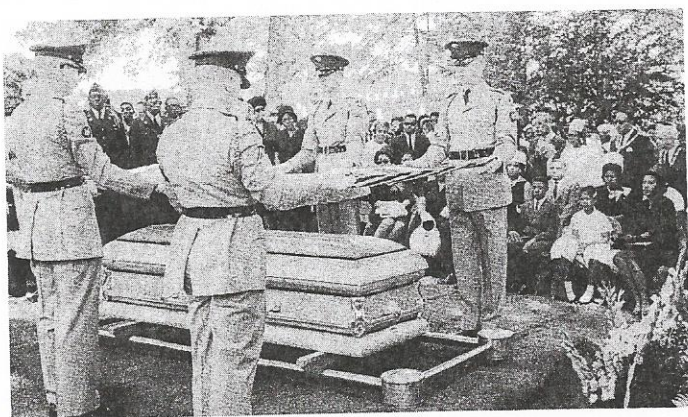
Four days later, Evers was buried in Arlington National Cemetery. A military bugler played "Taps" and the crowd of 2,000 sang "We Shall Overcome."

The day after Evers was buried, Mayor Thompson appointed the city's first black police officer, as part of an agreement reached with black leaders in the aftermath of Evers' murder. Although the settlement was not a complete victory for Jackson's black citizens, it was a major step toward the goals for which Medgar Evers had fought.

A year before his death, Evers told an interviewer why he devoted his life to the fight for civil rights: "I am a victim of segregation and discrimination, and I've been exposed to bitter experiences. These things have remained with me. But I think my children will be different. I think we're going to win." ●

"In Jackson, Mississippi, in 1963, there lived a man who was brave. He fought for freedom all of his life, But they laid Medgar Evers in his grave."

BOB DYLAN, "THE BALLAD OF MEDGAR EVERS"



children fell to the floor, as he had taught them to, and I made a run for the front door, turned on the light and there he was. The bullet had pushed him forward ... and the strong man that he was, he had his keys in his hand, and had pulled his body around the rest of the way to the door. There he lay."

Neighbors lifted Evers onto a mattress and drove him to

RAGE CONTAINED

Myrlie Evers had often heard her husband counsel forgiveness in the face of violence. But the night he was killed, there was only room for grief and rage in her heart. "I can't explain the depth of my hatred at that point," she said later. The next night, with newfound strength, she spoke before 500 people at a rally. She urged