

UNSUNG HEROES OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Along with legendary champions, thousands sacrificed during the era of change. Here are a few of their stories

BY A.J. BAIME

Martin Luther King Jr. Rosa Parks. Medgar Evers. John Lewis. These names ring through history as leaders of the vast, sprawling events that constituted the Civil Rights Movement in which African Americans struggled for equality during the 1950s, 1960s and beyond. But the movement could not have succeeded without thousands of people of all races making important, if often overlooked, contributions, and without millions of people moved by their efforts deciding that it was time to do the right thing.

For Black History Month, we went in search of those men and women who did their part to change the history of America, without seeking fame or reward, simply because they saw the need to become part of the solution.

Here are their stories.

Willie Pearl Mackey King on the Birmingham Jail Letter

82, living in Montgomery County, Maryland
King worked from 1962 to 1966 as a member of Martin Luther King Jr.'s executive staff.

WHERE I LIVED, in Atlanta in 1962, the landlady rented her extra bedrooms to college students and working young ladies. Dorothy Cotton lived on the first floor. [Cotton is known as a pillar of the Civil Rights Movement.] One day she asked if I was look-

ing for work. I had never worked in an office. Dorothy gave me an address and said, "You should go here and apply." That is how I got hired at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

They put me at the receptionist desk, and I started reading brochures about this place where I was working. I had never heard of "civil rights" before. Then, one day, this gentleman came in and greeted me, asking me about my church and my family. I realized that this was the man in the brochures! He was in charge of the Southern Christian Lead-

ership Conference, and his name was Martin Luther King Jr.

Dr. King asked me if I would go with him on certain trips. I was elated! In December of 1962, I went with Dr. King to Birmingham, to organize a "people-to-people tour" of the state of Alabama. We visited towns all over the state, and this is how the Birmingham movement got started.

This was to be nonviolent protest in the heart of Jim Crow. The FBI told Dr. King, "There are credible threats against your life."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 26



Willie Pearl Mackey King in her church in Silver Spring, Maryland
Inset: King typing the Birmingham jail letter

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 24

We cannot guarantee your safety.” Well, Dr. King called us together. He said, “If you decide you don’t want to go on this trip, that it’s too dangerous, I will not be offended. Because we could be killed.” I looked around, thinking it would be canceled. But no one else said no. I went off and did my crying, then came back and said, “I’m going.”

On Good Friday in 1962, after the protests in Birmingham began, Dr. King was arrested. A group of eight ministers wrote an article, “A Call to Unity,” saying Dr. King was an outsider and urging locals not to participate in what he was doing. Dr. King decided that he was going to write an answer. He was in jail, and he asked the jailers for pen and paper. They said, “You’re not in a library! You don’t get anything to write with.”

He wrote on the edges of newspaper, on toilet paper, on sandwich bags. His attorney Clarence Jones hid the scraps under his suit jacket and slipped them out of the jail. We had to put together this jigsaw puzzle. We were on the floor, trying to figure it out, Scotch-taping things together. Dr. King’s handwriting was not the best. The lighting was terrible in his jail cell.

That is how we developed the “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” When we released it, no one paid attention at first. Only when Bull Connor [the city’s commissioner of public safety] ordered fire hoses and dogs onto the demonstrators in Birmingham’s Kelly Ingram Park did we start getting requests for the “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” I could not mimeograph enough copies. [The letter became one of the most important documents of the civil rights era.]

If people read that letter today, they



will understand what Dr. King was doing in Birmingham, and why he was fighting so hard for civil rights.

In my opinion, none of his speeches or writings will give you a clearer vision of his mission.

My whole career was helping people. That was instilled in me by Dr. King and others that I worked with so closely. I can’t think of a better way to spend a life than helping people.