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## Belated Justice Wife of Slain Civil Rights Leader to Speak After Thirty-Year Search for Killer

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## **Belated Justice**

### **Wife of Slain Civil Rights Leader to Speak After Thirty-Year Search for Killer**

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--Three years ago this month, Myrlie Evers-Williams, wife of slain civil rights activist Medgar Evers, exited a Mississippi courtroom as the final victor in a thirty-year trial.

Medgar Evers' trial, as much a test of time as it was a judicial process, began in June, 1964, when his wife witnessed the murder of her husband by a white supremacist. Thirty-one years and three trials later, Medgar Evers' assassin was sentenced to prison for life.

Now the chairman of the board for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Myrlie Evers brings her powerful experiences to Illinois Wesleyan University.

Evers will address the public on Sunday, Feb. 15, at 7:30 p.m. in the IWU Shirk Center, 302 E. Emerson St. Tickets for Evers' speech and the annual Soul Food dinner, which will start at 6 p.m. in the Shirk Center, are \$5 for students and \$10 for general admission. Tickets are on sale at the Main Desk, IWU Memorial Student Center, 104 E. University Ave., Bloomington.

## **Living in Danger**

On the night of her husband's assassination, Evers and her three children--Darrell, Reena, and James--were watching television when they heard Medgar's car pull up in the driveway. Evers remembers listening for her husband's car, hoping he had survived another day.

"It was a time when we never knew if we would see each other again when he left home," Myrlie says, recalling the years she and Medgar spent fighting for blacks' rights in their native Mississippi.

Life had been dangerous for the Evers from the very beginning. After meeting as honor students at Alcorn A & M College in Lorman (Miss.) and marrying in 1951, the couple started business careers with Magnolia Mutual Life Insurance Company. Their work, which took them throughout the Mississippi Delta, exposed the two to the impoverishment and oppression

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## **Myrlie Evers/2**

suffocating the rights of local blacks.

Determined to change these conditions, Myrlie and Medgar opened the state's first NAACP office, where they worked to gain voting rights, fair housing and equal education for Mississippi blacks.

The couple's gains were accompanied by harsh reactions from local whites--in addition to constant harrassment and death threats, the Evers' home had been firebombed in the two weeks leading up to Medgar's murder. Medgar began hiding his identity and whereabouts for extra caution.

"He drove up and down the highways of Mississippi in disguise," Myrlie remembers. "There was this kind of intrigue, where you got out of one car and into a truck, and went from that into another truck or a beat-up car, to all kinds of changes of clothing. We had to speak on the telephone in code; I usually didn't even know where he was staying."

### **Death of an Icon**

Medgar's elaborate disguise tactics were successful, until he arrived home from work on the night of June 12, 1963. Stepping from his Oldsmobile, too tired to exit the passenger door as he usually did for safety, Medgar's caution failed him. A shot rang out, entering his back and throwing him face-forward onto the pavement.

By the time Medgar crawled to the front steps, Myrlie and the children had burst from the house to find him crumpled there.

"My two older kids came out screaming, 'Daddy! Daddy!'," Myrlie recounts. "I remember a small hole in his back, and when we turned him over there was so much blood. He'd been shot with the kind of bullet used to shoot deer."

Neighbors rushed Medgar to University Hospital, which they soon discovered refused black patients. Medgar, admitted after attendants discovered his identity, died a half-an-hour later, ending his life with the final ironic achievement of being the first black patient admitted at University.

FBI assigned to Medgar's murder tracked down a single suspect, Byron de la Beckwith, a 42-year-old fertilizer salesman and white supremacist who had privately boasted of killing Medgar Evers. However, de la Beckwith was

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released after two deadlocked all-white juries failed to convict him.

Upon the release of her husband's alleged killer, Myrlie moved her family to Claremont, Calif. to escape the pain.

"I felt guilty for leaving Mississippi," she says today, "I felt that I was leaving Medgar's memories, leaving the struggle. But I had to leave for my sanity and for the safety of my children. Of course, I came to Los Angeles only to discover that the same problems were here. Medgar's commitment and my own growing commitment compelled me to continue working for the cause."

### **Starting Over**

The day after her husband's death, Evers began speaking on behalf of the NAACP at local civil rights rallies. In California, Evers continued to gain public interest, lecturing before civil rights groups, women's organizations, social groups and universities.

Evers also enrolled at Pomona College, earning a bachelor's degree in sociology (she had earlier dropped out of school to marry Medgar).

After graduation, Evers became Director of Planning and Development for the Claremont Colleges. During this time, Evers also wrote a book, *For Us, the Living*, which relates the story of Medgar's life amidst the national struggle for civil rights in the 1950's and 60's.

In 1970, Evers' career took a political turn when she ran for Congress, earning 38% of the vote at a time when women were political rarities. Despite her loss, Evers believes the election was a personal turning point.

"That was the first time I let go of the security blanket of being Medgar's widow," she says. "I ran as Myrlie Evers, not Mrs. Medgar Evers."

Evers' corporate career expanded in 1973, when she joined the New York firm of Seligman & Latz as Vice President for Advertising and Publicity and established the company's first policy of social responsibility.

Evers later moved to the Atlantic Richfield Company (ARCO) as National Director for Community Affairs, where she developed the first-ever publication on women in non-traditional jobs for the Fortune 500 company.

In 1987, returning to the political arena, Evers ran as a candidate for a

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Los Angeles Council seat. Though Evers did not win, she was soon appointed Commissioner of the Los Angeles Board of Public Works by Mayor Tom Bradley.

Managing 6,000 employees and a \$400 million budget, Evers became the first black woman ever to serve in the position.

"People watched me progress from a 30-year-old widow who had never been totally responsible for herself to a public official who managed almost a billion dollars a year," Evers laughs.

Evers' personal life improved as well in the 1970's when she met Walter Williams, a retired longshoreman and union activist. When they married in 1976, Evers recalls public opinion of their relationship.

"There were many people who thought that I should not marry, that I should remain an eternal widow," she says. "But Walter gave me tremendous love and was strong enough to deal with Medgar's presence in my life."

#### **Back To Trial**

It was at Williams' urging that Evers continued to press for action on her husband's unsolved case, after two decades of prodding Mississippi authorities to search for new information.

In 1989, Evers persistence was rewarded when new witnesses came forward, challenging de la Beckwith's alibi. Evers met with the state's attorney, who reluctantly agreed to reopen the case after Evers produced a necessary trial transcript she had saved for thirty years.

De la Beckwith went to trial for a third time in 1994, and a tearfully jubilant Evers celebrated his subsequent conviction. For Evers, de la Beckwith's life sentence marked the end of an era.

"One person pulled that trigger, but so help me, I will forever believe that more people were involved in Medgar's death than the person who pulled the trigger," she says. "For 30 years, I had a very personal mission, researching, inquiring, praying that something, any hint of evidence would be found to reaffirm the case. It happened and a grand jury ordered a third trial. Often I was disappointed, but never discouraged. There never came a time when I considered giving up. I was prepared to keep my promise to

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Medgar to go with him the last mile of the way."

In 1995, the saga of Medgar Evers' assassination and the conviction of his killer thirty years later was documented in the drama film, "Ghosts of Mississippi." The film starred Alec Baldwin as the Mississippi State's Attorney who retried the case, James Woods as de la Beckwith, and Whoopi Goldberg as Myrlie Evers.

"Hopefully, those who see this film will be encouraged to continue with his [Medgar's] struggle and be inspired by what a great man Medgar Evers really was," Evers comments.

### **Crusading for the NAACP**

Evers' victory in the courtroom was bittersweet, but somewhat muted by the knowledge that her second husband was ill and dying. To complicate matters, the NAACP had begun to recruit Evers to run for the organization's Chairman of the Board position. At her husband's insistence, Evers campaigned in 1995 and won by a one-vote margin.

Within two weeks of the victory, Williams passed away, and Evers once again set out to speak for the NAACP amidst the mourning of a lost husband. Visiting up to 15 cities in a week, Evers fought to save the organization from previous scandal and a \$3.8 million debt.

"In even the oldest and finest mansion, there comes a time when you have to clean house," she said as she took her post. "If a broom won't do the job, a high-powered vacuum cleaner will."

Soliciting over a million dollars in corporate donations, Evers launched a massive campaign to register one million new black voters before the 1996 elections. Though Evers' efforts appear to have raised the standards of the organization--NAACP officials say membership is up--Evers does not believe her position will be long-term.

"I do not intend to stay in this position for a lifetime, but I want to leave knowing that we have found a way to attract people who didn't go through the fire in the 1950's and 1960's to join the NAACP," she explains. "I want to leave this organization healthy, knowing it can make a real difference in their lives."

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Now retired from the Board of Public Works, Evers has donated her Jackson (Miss.) home to the historically black Tougaloo College and plans to transform it into a center for cultural and social change.

For her lifetime efforts to equality and civil rights, Evers has won numerous awards, including the U.S. Congressional Black Caucus Achievement Award, the League of Women Voters' Woman of Honor Award, the NAACP Image Award--Civil Rights, the State of California Woman of the Year Award, and the African-American Institute Award "For the Relentless Pursuit of Human Rights" presented to her by Northeastern University (Ill.).

Evers, born and raised in Vicksburg, Mississippi by her paternal grandmother and aunt, credits much of her motivation to her guardians.

"They instilled in me that one of our purposes for being on this Earth is to help others and to serve," Evers says. "I have said that Medgar died for the NAACP. I will live for the NAACP."

## **Illinois Wesleyan University**

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls about 2,000 students in a College of Liberal Arts, College of Fine Arts, and a four-year professional School of Nursing. A \$15 million athletics and recreation center opened in the fall of 1994; and a \$25 million science building opened in the fall of 1995. The \$5.1 million Center for Liberal Arts--a facility housing 60 faculty offices, six classrooms, and other facilities for social science, humanities, business and economics, and interdisciplinary studies' faculty--opened in August, 1997, as well as a new \$6.8 million residence hall. The Carnegie Commission for the Advancement of Teaching promoted Illinois Wesleyan to a "Baccalaureate I" institution in 1994, a classification that places it among 159 highly selective National Liberal Arts Colleges in the annual *U.S. News & World Report* rankings. *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges*, another respected college guide, rated IWU "highly competitive (+)" in its latest edition.