



The March Continues



Nov. 3, 2009 — Twenty years ago, the nation’s first memorial to the martyrs of the Civil Rights Movement was dedicated at the Southern Poverty Law Center’s office in Montgomery, Ala.

In the two decades since its dedication, the Civil Rights Memorial has become more than a tribute to sacrificed lives. It has become a tool for education, an “instrument of justice” and a solemn reminder that the march for racial and social justice continues throughout the world.

“The Civil Rights Memorial is a testament to the power of everyday people to create social change through nonviolent means,” said Lecia Brooks, director of the Civil Rights Memorial Center. “The history told through the Memorial represents lessons of courage and commitment that continue to inspire millions of people today.”

CREATING THE MEMORIAL

A child’s question to SPLC founder Morris Dees sparked the idea for the Civil Rights Memorial.

In 1988, Dees was speaking at a meeting in Mobile, Ala. During the speech, he recited the names of civil rights activists and others who were murdered during the civil rights movement.

Afterward, a young member of the audience approached him and asked about the people he had named — people like

Medgar Evers and Viola Liuzzo. Who were they? On the way home that night, Dees decided that the SPLC should build a monument to the martyrs of the movement so that their sacrifices would never be forgotten.

“Each name is a history lesson, and we are saying, don’t just think of the deaths, but think of a movement of ordinary people who just got tired of injustice,” Dees told *The New York Times* in 1989.

The Memorial remembers 40 people, as young as 11 and as old as 66. Eight were white, and 32 were black. They came from all walks of life — students, farmers, ministers, truck drivers, a homemaker and a Nobel laureate.

Their names were inscribed on a circular, black granite table that chronicles the history of the movement in lines that radiate like the hands of a clock.

A blank space between the first and last entries on the Memorial timeline signifies that the struggle for human rights began before the Civil Rights Movement and continues to this day.

Water emerges from the table’s center and flows smoothly over the top. Behind it, water cascades over a curved black granite wall. Engraved on the wall are words from the Bible’s Book of Amos that civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., quoted on several occasions: “...until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

THE DEDICATION

They were the relatives who came to see their slain loved ones honored. They were the civil rights leaders who came to see the movement remembered. And they were the modern-day activists who recognized the work that remained. They were all among the thousands who attended the dedication of the Civil Rights Memorial. The SPLC’s first president, Julian Bond, spoke then of the hardship and sacrifice endured by the martyrs but reminded the crowd they had not gathered in sorrow.

“(The martyrs) gave an equal measure of devotion so that all of us might be free,” said Bond, who is now an SPLC board member. “Buried with each is a bit of American apartheid, for their deaths kept the movement marching on. That is why we honor them today not in sorrow, but in celebration.”

“Poetry in granite,” was how Carolyn Goodman described the Memorial to *The Associated Press* in 1989. Her son, Andrew Goodman, who was shot to death, is included among the martyrs.

“Nobody who sees it cannot feel that it’s a moving, moving piece of art,” she said. “It brings that period so vividly alive that you can almost relive it.”

At the time of the dedication, most of the family members in attendance still waited for justice for the killing of their loved one. Many of the murders remained unsolved.

This reality inspired Jerry Mitchell, a journalist at *The Clarion-Ledger* in Jackson, Miss., to dedicate his career to investigating these cases. His extensive reporting led to several successful prosecutions, including the conviction of the man who killed Goodman’s son. Edgar Ray Killen went to prison in 2005 for 60 years for helping orchestrate the

killings of Andrew Goodman and his friends, James Chaney and Michael Schwerner, in 1964.

A TEACHING TOOL

Each year, the Civil Rights Memorial attracts more than 20,000 visitors. Civil rights activists from Europe, Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America have found inspiration at the Memorial. Others have included the Memorial as a poignant part of their vacation or family reunion. Students of all ages have visited it to learn about the movement and modern human rights struggles.

Since 1998, the Congressional Civil Rights Pilgrimage has brought nearly 150 members of Congress to the Memorial as part of an annual tour of historic civil rights sites.

“This is a special and sacred space,” said U.S. Rep. John Lewis, D-Ga., leader of the congressional delegation and a veteran of the Civil Rights Movement. “They gave their blood, and ... we gather here to remember them.”

In 2005, the SPLC added the Civil Rights Memorial Center (CRMC), further transforming the site into more than a commemoration of the past. The visitor center, housed in the SPLC’s former office, includes interactive exhibits and a powerful 20-minute film — “Faces in the Water” — about the martyrs and the movement. It also recognizes current struggles for equality in special exhibits.

“As visitors touch the names on the Memorial and see their own faces reflected in the water, we hope they contemplate what they can do in their lives to make ‘justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream,’” said SPLC President Richard Cohen. “It’s up to each of us to ensure that the march for justice continues.”