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The New Coretta Scott King: Emerging From the Legacy

The Widow Has Assumed Her Husband's Burden—and More

Photos, from left: by Steve Helber for The Washington Post; United Press International; Associated Press; and The Washington Post

Coretta Scott King at home in Atlanta, left; and above, from left: at her marriage to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1953; marching with her husband in Atlanta in 1966; and, with her children, at King's funeral in 1968.

By Jacqueline Trescott

ATLANTA—In the still-echoing cacophony of marches, speeches, songs, tears and shots, it was her happiest moment, Coretta Scott King recalls.

Early that morning, she called the hospital where her husband had checked in for a few days of rest just the night before, and woke him up by asking, "How is the Nobel Peace Prize winner for 1964 feeling this morning?"

As they prepared for the trip to Oslo, they discussed the added responsibilities the honor brought. But, for a while, they'd had a good time. They marveled at the requests for autographs from white waitresses at the airport, laughing at King's conclusion that they thought he was a baseball player. Part of the way, they traveled separately, as they always had done.

On Dec. 10, 1964, Coretta King was bursting with pride as she helped her husband tie his ascot for the formal Nobel ceremony, thinking how handsome he looked, how his eagerness was like that of a boy dressing for a party.

Before they returned to the United States—before Selma, before Chicago, before Memphis—the Kings danced in public, the first time since their student days in Boston. They did a waltz, surprisingly, at a party of African students in Stockholm celebrating the independence of Kenya.

Briefly, with a touch of whimsy, she recalls that night, becoming solemn once again as she speaks of humanitarianism and responsibility, the theme of her own life.

"I always knew that Martin's burden was also mine," she says. "The Nobel Prize vindicated our hopes, the sense that you were not alone. You always have that kind of feeling. We both knew this meant we had greater work to do—you can be thankful, you can be humble, but the greatest task was ahead."

Ahead, of course, was a singular loneliness, a singular role as she became the symbol of a woman unfairly alone and the reminder of her husband's dream.

In the near-10 years since Martin Luther King Jr. was killed on April 4, 1968, she has assumed his burden, working hard to channel his aspirations into the disheveled course of the '70s. In the days following his death, a nation dealt with its grief, at times, in ways violently at odds with his philosophy.

Four days after his assassination, she marched in Memphis. She would retreat neither into inactivity nor into revenge.

Today, to most of the world, she is, more than anything else, a noble reminder of the man. The gap King left was the voice that gave people hope, told them it was all right to take risks, that the promise of equality was important enough to die for. She hopes she is a credible interpreter of that legacy.

To some Coretta King is a remarkable woman; to others, an exploiter of the King name and a prima donna. Out of respect for her husband, very few make those accusations publicly. At times, she has seemed to embrace the status of marble saint that some would endow; other times, she has rejected the special treatment.

In the last three years, she has emerged as a leader in her own right, principally as a spokesman for full employment and women's rights. "She has emerged as Coretta Scott King, carrying on her husband's work, not just as the widow," said one old friend.

She will say very quickly, however, that she has always been her own person. "The media never understood Martin, so they will not understand Coretta," she says. "I didn't learn my commitment from Martin, we just converged at a certain time."

It's about midnight and Coretta King has changed from a conservative, white knit pants suit, the one she wore for the first 15 hours of her day, into a soft, red lounging robe. Despite the pressures of the 24 years since she married King on June 18, 1953, her looks haven't changed that much when com-

See KING, N4, Col. 1

KING, From N1

pared to the wedding picture on the wall. At 50, she is stouter than in her student days. Her long, black hair is still styled in a casual, shoulder-length flip. When she smiles, her face relaxes into an impish heart shape, softening her hooded eyes, long nose and full mouth.

Before Martin King, she was preparing for a career as a concert singer and was a supporter of peace movements and the left-wing politics of Henry Wallace. During her husband's movement, she was, principally, the mother of four children, his personal adviser, and a key fundraiser, giving a series of concerts. Coretta King's own pacifist stand influenced his decision to speak out against the Vietnam War in the mid-1960s.

Since his death, Coretta King has been the main force behind the King Center for Social Change, a multimillion dollar memorial and civil rights organization. Since the end of the Vietnam War and the activity of the antiwar movement, she has co-chaired the National Committee for Full Employment and served as a public delegate to the United Nations this past session.

Each year she sponsors a commemorative program around the anniversary of King's birthday, which is today. He would have been 49. Next month, a six-hour film on King's life, which has her sanction but has been criticized by some former King associates, will be shown on NBC Television. Cicely Tyson, the award-winning actress, will portray Coretta Scott King.

"People think of Coretta as a grand but helpless lady," says U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young. "When you get to know her she is as strong and stubborn as any you can come across. She comes from the line of Southern black woman who had to carry the family through tough situations."

She is not a woman for whom time stood still. Yet, in her basement, still waiting for completion of the center's archives, are a closet of King's clothes, his bicycle and boxes of correspondence and condolences. His Chevrolet sedan is in the garage. Yet it's not something she and her four children dwell on. "As a family, we could not linger in his shadow," she says. "We moved forward in his light."

The black woman in the television studio audience was fuming. Coretta King, she thought, was putting feminism ahead of blackness, by praising the solidarity of the National Women's Conference in Houston.

"Mrs. King, you don't understand poor folk. You have never been poor," the woman said. Here we go again, Coretta King thought, as she took a deep breath and bit back a counterattack. Very slowly, she answered, "I do understand. As a youngster I picked cotton. I have worked all my adult life on the cause. I don't give myself a salary. And since 1968 I have marched with welfare mothers and hospital workers. I do understand."

She has been there. Coretta Scott King was born outside Marion, Ala. in a two-room house built by her father, Obadiah Scott, a businessman who hauled logs and timber, and also worked as a barber. Her mother, Bernice, and the two other children raised hogs, cows and chickens and vegetables on their land.

Because they were third-generation landowners, the Scotts were respected, but they faced the common problems of prejudice. In Marion, a teen-aged Coretta Scott had a part-time job doing housework for a white woman. She balked at using the back door or always addressing her boss as "ma'am." The job didn't last long. After the Depression, her father prospered enough to buy three trucks. He was getting too far ahead, reflected his family later, because their house was burnt down. When he bought a saw mill, it was also burnt.

An education in the North was viewed by the Scotts, as by many black families, as a passport to equality. In 1943 Coretta's older sister, Edythe, became the first black student at Antioch College, Yellow Springs, Ohio. Coretta followed shortly after. But, although the color barrier had been broken, the college did not back her officially when she was denied a practice teaching post in the town's elementary school. She channeled her outrage into campus groups like the NAACP, and is remembered by classmates as a sensitive, outspoken person.

Increasingly, also, her ambitions were changing from the traditional pattern of teaching to a career in music. In fact it became an overriding ambition. At the time, she wanted to be a female Paul Robeson.

"My influence as a singer was Paul Robeson. I sang for him at one of the Progressive Party meetings, I asked what he thought and he said he liked it, 'go ahead and get the best training possible,' was his advice," Coretta King says, her chin rising slightly in the stance of a concert singer. "I admired Robeson so much because he was a tremendous personality, he was a powerful figure on the stage, combining the singing with the social issues. That was what I planned to do."

In 1951 she enrolled at the New England Conservatory of Music. Her scholarship covered only her tuition. After a brief period on a hardship diet of crackers and peanut butter, she found a room in Boston's exclusive Beacon Hill section, where she cleaned part of the house for her room and breakfast.

One evening in February, 1952, she received a telephone call from a young Baptist minister, Martin Luther King Jr., who was studying at Boston University. He came from a middle-class family in Atlanta, had attended Morehouse College, Crozer Theological Seminary, and was considered a catch in Atlanta social circles.

On their first date, her first, fleeting impression was that he was too short. He saw in the 25-year-old woman the intellect, the humor, the poise that he had been looking for in a companion. On the way home, King said, "You have everything I have ever wanted in a wife."

Coretta King opens the white iron gate door of her home, and the blare of the Sylvers, a bubblegum soul group, almost knocks the paperwork she had brought from the office out of her arms.

See KING, N5, Col. 1

KING, From N4

She's home. Here she is not the symbolic widow, the president of the King Center, the U.N. delegate, or the woman at the conference table with the U.S. President. Here she's simply mother, and it's the role she likes best.

Her eyes quickly inspect the kitchen. She calls Bunny, her 15-year-old daughter. She gets no answer. "She's back there giggling with a girl friend. At this age, they want to court. She calls the boys on the phone. I don't think young girls should do things like that, but it's a different age," she sighs.

(Yet, despite her annoyance, when Bunny asks her to accompany her to a school play, Coretta King postpones other plans and sits through two hours of an all-black production of "Fiddler on the Roof.")

All their lives, Coretta King has made her children her first priority. She never went to jail, agreeing with her husband that one parent should be at home. Yet there was an ambivalence. Sometimes, right after a heated discussion on her role, he would send her out to make a speech in his stead.

When Yolanda could not understand why her parents wouldn't take her to the new amusement park, Funtown, her mother explained, "Funtown was built by people who decided that they did not want colored people to come. They are not good Christians. Your daddy is trying to make it possible for you to go everywhere." When she heard a babysitter teaching them the nighttime prayer, using the line "if I should die before I wake," Coretta King corrected the woman, saying, "We don't teach death in this house, we teach living."

Very aware that the children could become spoiled, especially as their father was viewed as a hero in their own school, she worked hard to make sure they were level-headed, as well as individuals. Yolanda, 23, is a drama student at New York University, and both Dexter, 17, and Bunny, 14, attend public school in Atlanta.

"She has instilled the value of making a contribution in us," says Martin III, now 20, and the third generation of Kings to attend Morehouse College. "As we have grown she seeks out our opinions. She's more liberal than Dad in many ways. He said 'be a Morehouse man,' she said 'don't infringe on their choices.' And I made up my own mind."

As the children grow up, she says she plans to spend more time on her music, as well as the King Center.

"I would like to sing. I like the singing. I don't think I need the audience, I have that now, but I don't get the same release from speaking," she says. Would she ever marry again? "Well, you don't think about it if you don't have a proposal. It would have to be someone who will be understanding, share my values, accept me as I am. I will always be talking about Martin, we were both wedded to the cause. If I hadn't had that I guess I would have gone crazy. No, I'm not the kind of woman to go crazy."

The 382 days of the Montgomery, Ala., bus boycott, sparked by the courage, and tired feet, of a seamstress, Mrs. Rosa Parks, were over.

The Kings were happy, the movement was growing and gaining respectability; in one short period King, the pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, was the subject of a Time magazine cover and received the NAACP'S Spingarn Medal. They had learned that threats to their lives were part of the daily routine, and Coretta King, and their 9-week-old daughter, Yolanda, had survived a bombing of their home.

During this period, Coretta King was often frustrated that she could not be at her husband's side during the mass meetings, but she hid her feelings from even close friends. When she had to be absent because of their growing family and because their home had become a focal point for volunteers, she had King's speeches taped.

One morning in September, 1958, she was home, anticipating King's return from a publicity tour for his first book, "Stride Toward Freedom." The telephone rang, and she learned that King had been stabbed while autographing books in Blumstein's department store in Harlem. A woman had pushed up to him, and asked, "Are you Mr. King?" As he nodded, she plunged a Japanese letter opener, shaped like a dart, into his chest. "Luther King, I have been after you for five years," she said.

Terribly frightened, Coretta King prayed as she flew to New York. At the airport, where her friends Stanley Levison and Bayard Rustin had been wondering how they would comfort her, she ended up consoling them.

"And the doctor said, 'If he had sneezed, he would have died.' Later Martin used that as a theme for a sermon," Coretta King says, recalling that most trying time.

She carried on, frightened at this first brush with death, hurt because the attack had come not from a crazed Southern cracker, as anticipated, but from a sick, black woman. Her anxiety led to a pain in her chest. Nonetheless, she set up an office at Harlem Hospital, answering every call, from the governors to the bellhops.

Friends like the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy, who flew with her from Montgomery to New York, and attorney and advisor Stan Levison, tried to distract her. Levison talked about the trip to India the Kings were planning.

"Stan, I don't think we are ready to go. Those people in India have suffered greatly. I don't think we have suffered enough."

One day last August Rev. Abernathy was at one part of Auburn Avenue holding a press conference to denounce the NBC movie "King" as a distortion. A few blocks down the street, Coretta King, already annoyed because she had to ask city officials to include a visit to King's grave on Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere's schedule, handed out a terse press release. "No one is more concerned than I about how my husband's image is being projected," it read.

Her response to criticism—either attacks on her husband's accomplishments or private life, or on her own character and motivations, produces a private anger carefully masked in public.

The friction between King and Abernathy is a nagging, in-house annoyance that associates of both wish would go away. After King's death, Abernathy was elected president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the organization they had both started in the late 1950s. Meanwhile Coretta King was developing the center, not only as a memorial, but as an institution with similar goals. Quite naturally they began to compete for funds. As the center grew, mainly physically, SCLC got less attention. Now, King and Abernathy do work on occasional joint projects but D.C. Delegate Walter Fauntroy, a mutual friend, says, "They do speak. However, there's no great fellowship there."

Only once did she ever let her composure slip in public.

In the DeKalb County (Ga.) courtroom in 1960 a judge sentenced Martin Luther King to six months hard labor for driving with an invalid license. His older sister, Christine, first broke into tears. Co-

See KING, N6, Col. 1

Beyond the Legacy

KING, From N5

retta followed, despite the scoldings of Rev. Martin L. King Sr. When King Jr. saw the tears streaming down his wife's face, he said, "Corrie, I've never seen you like this, you have to stand up for me."

She really felt she had let him down. It was his worst jail experience, his first without his colleagues. He was afraid he would be killed and he was so depressed, he cried. The State Penitentiary in Reidsville was 300 miles from Atlanta where the Kings now lived, and his wife's travel was limited by an advanced pregnancy. When he asked her for books and money, she had sent the books but forgot the money.

At her most despondent moment, Sen. John Kennedy called, asking if he could help. Aware that his telephone call could be used in his presidential campaign, and realizing her husband had never endorsed a presidential candidate, Coretta King said simply, "I certainly appreciate your concern. I would appreciate anything you could do to help."

The next day King was released, and that evening, at a rally at Ebenezer Baptist Church, the King church for three generations, King Sr., staunch Baptist, staunch Republican, announced he would vote for Kennedy instead of Richard Nixon. That endorsement, one that was considered a turning point for John Kennedy, was the beginning of the Kings and politics.

In 1972, Coretta King, who had announced her support of Sen. George McGovern, after thinking about it for one year, escorted the senator into a meeting of black delegates to the convention. She had been advised against it by the center's director, not only because political sentiment was high for Shirley Chisholm, but because it seemed unnecessary arm-twisting. She was booed.

In 1976 she withheld her endorsement of Jimmy Carter until he promised support of the Humphrey-Hawkins Bill for full employment. At a session with black politicians and Carter at last year's Democratic convention, she brought it up. And was applauded.

At the White House last month, a group of 16 black leaders were being briefed by Cabinet officers, when President Carter joined the meeting. Everyone stood up, and then before anyone spoke, Coretta King, who had been talking about sacrificing human needs programs in order to balance the budget, said to Carter: "If you don't mind, I was speaking when you came in, and I would like to finish my point."

On Good Friday, 1963, King went to jail in Birmingham, Ala. He called Birmingham the "colossus" of segregation. Coretta King called it "the most difficult test."

Usually King called home right after each arrest. But this time Coretta King, who was recovering from surgery after the birth of their fourth child, Bernice (Bunny), did not hear from him.

By Sunday morning she was more than worried—she was scared. Yet, she and her sister, Edythe Bagley, kept their anxiety from the children, and from each other.

Finally a friend, Rev. Wyatt Tee Walker, advised her to call President Kennedy. She agreed but told Walker, "You try to get a note to Martin, I wouldn't do anything he wouldn't approve of."

On Monday evening at 6 p.m., after conversations with Pierre Salinger and Robert Kennedy, emphasizing that her calls centered about her anxiety about her husband's safety, not attempts to seek his release, Coretta King received a call from the White House.

"It was the President. He talked about his father, how ill he was, and I said, 'I'm sorry.' Then he said, 'we have checked on your husband, sent the FBI in there, and he's all right,'" she recalled. Fifteen minutes later, King called her, himself.

Ahead were more trials, joys, and moments of decisions—Medgar Evers' assassination, the march on Washington, the bombing of King's brother's home, the bombing that killed four girls in a Birmingham church, the Kennedy assassination, the murders of Chaney, Goodman

See KING, N7, Col. 1

KING, From N6

and Schwerner, the letter suggesting suicide (later traced to the FBI), Selma, Chicago, the abortive housing integration attempt, and, finally— Memphis.

Long into the night after the assassination she was answering hundreds of phone calls, consoling the King family and her own children, making the funeral arrangements and broke down only once, an old friend recalled, when she listened to a tape of a sermon King had given exactly two months before. From the pulpit of Ebenezer, King had said, "if any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I'd like somebody to mention that day, that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others. . ."

"When I look back I don't know how I made it, four kids and all," says Coretta King, pausing for a long time, "but I took it very well, all those trying times, like the assassination, you kind of accept that, because you have been expecting that."

In a locked, glass cabinet in the basement of the King home, along with memorabilia of King, is a bouquet of red artificial flowers.

"Martin came home one evening and said he had gone to do some shopping, he bought some turtleneck sweaters," and Coretta King stopped, smiling. "He liked his clothes, though he had tried to live simply." The day was March 12, 1968. King, who had just agreed to lead a protest march in Memphis on March 28, in the midst of planning for the Poor People's Campaign, had ordered the flowers from a florist. "When I saw the flowers I said, 'Why artificial ones?' That night I sat and stared at them but it didn't hit me until much later. He had never given me artificial flowers before and they weren't attractive but, maybe he knew, maybe he wanted me to have something that would last."

Sometimes Coretta King does seem like she is holding court, sitting on the dais, extending her hand to all well-wishers. She can get agitated if she is overlooked or not given a promiment place on a program. In her speeches she usually mentions her husband, and, at different times, her tone can be inspirational or irksome.

There's yet another Coretta King, far away from the spotlight. One evening in Atlanta, after a day of crisscrossing town several times for meetings, she stopped by a friend's house. This woman friend, who occasionally shops for her, lives in a bleak housing project, her living space the size of Coretta King's kitchen and dining room. Yet Coretta King appeared perfectly at home. They chatted, as old friends do, of their lives and doings as Coretta King tried on the fur coat the friend had selected.

Later, in her office at the center, Mrs. King was meeting with six men from Atlanta's Spanish-speaking community. They asked about participating in the King birthday observance. An aide piped up and said, "We hope you can participate in the cultural night."

Coretta King looked as if she wanted to crawl under the desk. Before she could speak, one man said, "I think people would resent being only asked to dance." Soothingly, Coretta King smoothed out an awkward moment: "I know how you feel," she said. "White folks have been doing that to us for years."

The weather this winter morning was chilly, and the wind made the water around the King crypt, now one of Atlanta's principal tourist attractions, slightly choppy. In an animated yet serene way, Coretta King was showing Douglas Fraser, president of the United Auto Workers, whose union had just given a $600,000 grant to the King Center, around the grave site.

Rev. Martin L. King Sr., known as Daddy King, joined the entourage at one point, pecking his daughter-in-law, who was still commuting between New York and Atlanta for her U. N. duties, on the cheek with the word, "Stranger."

The union's grant will be used for completion of the last physical phase of the center's development. The center has completed most of the grave site, restoration of the King birth home and a community center.

The center grew out of King's own suggestion in 1967 that his wife start pulling together the documents of the civil rights movement. At first the organization was called a memorial center, essentially a library, and Coretta King kept her offices in her home basement. Her relationships with a parade of directors were often stormy. In 1970 several disgruntled employees picketed the center. Starting in 1973, the center developed an identity more in keeping with the vision of the King family. Coretta King moved her offices into the center's temporary home at the Gammon Theological Seminary and oversaw all projects of the center. This has led to some additional friction, especially with the executive directors. "Her attention to every detail began to take its toll on me personally. I began to lose my energy. She's very demanding, very exacting and this tends to restrict," said Rev. Calvin Morris, the executive director from 1973 to 1976. "But privately, she's warm, humorous, and very relaxed, far from the false depiction of her as an aloof queen."

Coretta King was reading the black women's section of the minority rights plank before the delegates of the National Women's Conference last November.

Her own work with women had predated this modern surge of interest in women's rights. In 1962 she joined a delegation from the Women's Strike for Peace in Geneva, Switzerland, the site of the atomic-test-ban talks. Since 1969 she had worked with the National Union of Hospital and Nursing Home Employees. But she was skeptical about the sensitivity of the general membership of the modern feminists. She didn't think they really understood infant mortality and involuntary sterilization.

But she went to Houston, performing both ceremonial and strategic roles. Now, after soothing some bickering of the minority women themselves, she was presenting their goals to the entire delegation. As she finished, the group burst into the civil rights anthem, "We Shall Overcome." She was surprised, but touched, and shook hands down the aisle as the words followed her out the hall.It may not have been the vision Martin and Coretta King shared as they walked from Selma to Montgomery. But it was the civil rights spirit behind the spontaneity of the moment.

This response was not unlike many she has experienced over the last 10 years, Coretta King recalls, sipping tea at her kitchen counter. But her pride in keeping alive Martin King's legacy is mixed with a sort of wonder. She says, "someone said to me the other day 'how can you be puffed up and have such a deep commitment?' But sometimes I believe I'm not doing it. It's being done through me. I'm just grateful to have been a part of a great moment, Martin's moment, in history."