

30 years later, echoes of shot that killed King still reverberate

By Mike Harden
Dispatch Columnist

Editor's note: The road that carried Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to Memphis, Tenn., and death 30 years ago is scarred with mileposts marking the strife along the way: bombed churches and martyred children, freedom buses set aflame, vicious confrontations with snarling police dogs and high-pressure fire hoses. Thirty years after King's assassination, Dispatch columnist Mike Harden revisits the towns and cities of the South whose names became household words during the struggle for racial equality: Selma, Montgomery and Birmingham, Ala.; Memphis; and Jackson and Philadelphia, Miss. How did they change? What did it mean? Harden will explore those questions during the next two weeks.

MEMPHIS, Tenn. — The Rev. Samuel Billy Kyles knew the wound was mortal the instant he looked at his longtime friend.
The bottom of his cheekbone and



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part of his neck were blown away," Kyles remembered. "The bullet had severed his tie and turned the knot upside-down. His eyes moved reflexively, but he didn't say a word. There was a crumpled cigarette in his palm. Because of the pressure he had been under, he had started smoking."

Moving swiftly to the telephone in Room 306 of the Lorraine Motel, Kyles tried to reach the switchboard operator to summon an ambulance. The operator, though, having heard the commotion, had rushed out to the courtyard. She would suffer a heart attack there, and die the following day.

As the flow of blood slowed to a trickle, Kyles knelt and spread a bedsheet to the chin of Dr. Martin

Luther King Jr. Reaching into King's palm, he removed the crumpled cigarette and instructed the Rev. Jesse Jackson to telephone Coretta.

D'Army Bailey, now a circuit court judge in Tennessee's 30th Judicial District, was working late at the New York City offices of the Law Students Civil Rights Research Council when he learned that King had been killed.

Stunned, speechless, he began packing to return to his hometown, Memphis, the following day.

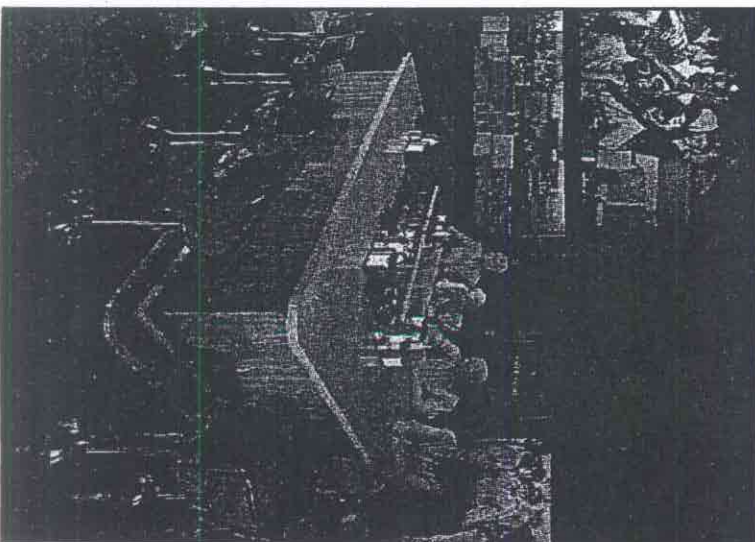


Bailey

In the years that followed, Bailey — not unlike Kyles — was destined to play a crucial role in preserving the memory of King's legacy and the tragedy at the Lorraine.

Thirty years after the assassination, though, the two men are miles apart in their appraisals of what has come of

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Display in National Civil Rights Museum recalls lunch-counter sit-ins.

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King's dream.

Bailey, son of a Pullman porter for the Illinois Central Railroad, resides with his wife and two sons in an elegant brick home in Memphis' Hein Park, but he realizes not everyone has enjoyed the same progress.

"There is still systematic poverty in large areas of black America,"

Bailey said. "There is increasing isolation of black and white, rich and poor, and a decline in the compassion and awareness of middle-class whites, a deafness of corporate leadership and the advent of a strong Republican conservatism directed at keeping a foot on black people's necks."

Kyles, pastor of Memphis' Monument Baptist Church, uses a personal anecdote to measure the distance the movement has come.

"I went to jail for sitting in the front of a bus in Memphis in 1962," he recalled. "Now, the chairman of the trustees of my church, an African-American, is the chairman of the bus company."

He wearies of the complaints of those born after King's death.

"Those people who say we are worse off now than we were then, weren't there. They don't know anything about sitting in the back of the bus. They've always been able to sit in the front of the bus and go in hotels and restaurants.

"I used to know the name of every African-American in Congress. Now there are too many to count, and I love it. You have an African-American mayor and council members."

Taylor Rogers was a 32-year-old Memphis sanitation worker when King came to town to try to help settle the city's garbage strike in 1968. "I was just a worker at the time," Rogers said. "I was making \$1.25 an hour. No hospitalization. No pension."

He carried garbage in tubs rotted through at the bottom, so that they leaked foul juices through his clothes and into his shoes.

He had been hauling Memphis garbage for a decade and seen his hourly pay increase by only 29 cents.

King "put aside everything he was doing to come to Memphis for us," Rogers said.

Kyles believes that when King came to Memphis, something in him knew that the end was near.

When he arrived, he told Kyles, "I've heard about threats from some of my sick white brothers."

"J. Edgar Hoover had declared that Martin would never again have a peaceful march in America," Kyles said. "Hoover didn't want him killed. He wanted him discredited, embarrassed."

A March in Memphis days before King's death had disintegrated into violence and looting. Police shot and killed a 16-year-old.

Richard Caywood, one of King's attorneys, said the civil-rights leader was worried about the disruption of not only a planned march in Memphis but the upcoming poor people's march on Washington.

"He said that there were whites that wanted him to fail and blacks that wanted him to fail," Caywood said.

Kyles said, "Hoover didn't want Martin to bring all of those poor people to Washington and pitch tents."

It was a reflective King who spoke at the Memphis Masonic Temple the night before he was gunned down. His words deeply unsettled Kyles. "It was terribly prophetic," Kyles said. "I had never heard him

dwell on death as much as he did that night.

"He said, 'Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over and I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you.'"

Kyles lamented, "I am so certain that he knew he would not get there with us. I believe he was cleansing himself of the fear of death."

The following evening at the Lorraine Motel, King, the Rev. Ralph Abernathy and Kyles made small talk in Room 306 as they readied to leave for dinner at Kyles' home. As they started to depart, King stepped onto the balcony with Kyles.

"He was leaning over the railing talking to Jesse Jackson," Kyles recalled. "I said, 'C'mon, let's go.' I started inside, took four or five steps. It was as though the killer was waiting for me to move so he could get a clear shot."

That quickly it was over. Today, Room 306 is preserved as it was 30 years ago, the centerpiece of the National Civil Rights Museum that the Lorraine became largely through Bailey's unceasing work.

The covers of the bed are pulled down in 306. A tray rests on a small table. The door to the balcony is closed. A red-and-white wreath hangs from the balcony rail near the spot where King fell.

After the assassination, the Lorraine went downhill. Prostitutes prowled the sidewalk, turning tricks in all the rooms except 306.

By the time Bailey mustered the troops and the money to begin the museum, the Lorraine was in foreclosure. At a sheriff's sale, it was purchased for \$140,000.

It was officially dedicated as the museum in 1991.

One of its more compelling exhibits depicts striking sanitation workers wearing placards that proclaim, "I am a man." Any of those figures could have been Rogers, who eventually rose from a \$1.25-an-hour garbage man to the president of the local union that came to represent him and his co-workers. The union chapter is named for King.

When Rogers retired in 1992, he was making \$14 an hour.

Kyles still preaches the gospel of his fallen friend.

For years after the shooting, he wondered why God had put him in that room on that night.

After a long time, the answer came to him.

"I was there to be a witness," he said, "a witness that Martin didn't die in a foolish way, but helping garbage workers, poor people working two steps above slavery."