

Sheen of the King Legacy Dims On New, More Profitable Path

By KEVIN SACK

ATLANTA, Aug. 18 — For more than 25 years after the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., his widow and four children were Atlanta's royalty.

World leaders made pilgrimages to the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change on Auburn Avenue here to pay tribute. Presidential candidates begged for an audience, preferably with a photo opportunity. A reverential press dutifully reported official pronouncements and rarely, if ever, criticized.

But now, as the family prepares to transform Dr. King's legacy into a financial empire and as it takes its most public role in years — an extraordinary mission to prove the innocence of his convicted killer, James Earl Ray — its reputation has lost much of its imperial sheen. Both in the city where they once held court, and among civil rights figures, the Kings are now routinely, and openly, derided.

"If they are the repository of King's legacy, I don't see much being done to spread the message of his life and work," Julian Bond, the civil rights veteran and scholar, said in one typical remark.

This change in status parallels a stark generational shift in the family's leadership from Dr. King's widow, Coretta Scott King, who is 70, to her 36-year-old son, Dexter Scott King. After succeeding his mother as both the head of the King center and executor of Dr. King's estate, Mr. King quickly consolidated control over the family's social agenda and financial affairs.

Since then, with halting, often awkward steps, Mr. King has put together a vision for preserving his father's legacy that relies more on the Internet and intellectual property rights than on the cause-oriented mission that Mrs. King established for the King center in 1968.

One measure of the change: the center — whose mission statement declares its dedication to

"research, education and training in nonviolent philosophy and strategy" — no longer offers workshops on nonviolence.

In many ways, the transition from mother to son has highlighted the generational differences, in both substance and style, between the marchers and dreamers of the civil rights era and the deal makers and realists of today.

Dexter King and his siblings are, quite literally, the children and beneficiaries of their father's movement. And although Dr. King was famously uncomfortable with wealth, so much so that he gave civil rights groups the \$54,000 he won with the 1964 Nobel

A DIFFERENT DREAM

A special report.

Peace Prize, his children have not hesitated to claim what they view as their birthright.

Earlier this year, the Kings signed a multimedia publishing deal with Time Warner that is based on the family's intellectual property rights to Dr. King's words and image. The deal is projected to transform the King estate into a fund worth \$30 million to \$50 million. The estate, whose beneficiaries are Mrs. King and her children, was valued at \$66,492.29 at Dr. King's death in 1968, according to court records.

Then in March, in a race against time to answer a seminal question about his family's history, Mr. King staged a televised prison meeting with the terminally ill Mr. Ray, who confessed to killing Dr. King and then recanted in 1968.

Without any showing of evidence, Mr. King declared that his family believed Mr. Ray innocent of any knowing involvement in the killing. Mr. King later implicated President Lyndon B. Johnson in a Government conspiracy,

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a theory promoted by Mr. Ray's lawyer, William F. Pepper. Mr. King has joined Mr. Pepper in calling for a trial.

The Youngest Son

Different Agenda Provokes Backlash

If Mr. King seems an independent spirit, his friends say, it is because he feels unfettered by the history and emotional bonds of the civil rights movement. Mr. King himself makes no claim to civil rights leadership. Nor does he think the King center should be in the business of civil rights activism, at least not beyond enshrining his father's legacy and preserving its relevance for those who know little of the Montgomery bus boycott and the march to Selma.

"I have never seen myself the way the media has portrayed me, as a leader," Mr. King said in a recent two-hour interview in his office at the center. "I'm not trying to have a constituency. I'm not trying to be preachy or be on a pedestal. I'm not trying to effect change on that level, not because it's not something that should be done, but that's just not my best destiny."

Mr. King also dismissed the recent attacks on his family as the growling of old lions, and he recalled that his father also was a reluctant leader who was not always instantly accepted.

"There's a lag time," he said, "between what you do as a pioneer and the time people catch up to where you are."

If, as Mr. King says, he is not trying to have a constituency, he seems to be succeeding. With almost every endeavor, he has excited intense opposition or, at the very least, befuddlement. The criticism has been remarkable not only because it has been so public but also because so much of it has come from former allies or from those who might be expected to be friendly.

It flows from civil rights veterans who marched at Dr. King's side, from board members of the King center, from the pulpit of the church where Dr. King, his father and his maternal grandfather had been pastor, and from the liberal black editorial page editor of *The Atlanta Constitution*.

Some historians suggest that the family's activities threaten to tarnish Dr. King's legacy itself.

"Unfortunately, at some level, the behavior of the family does impact, does hurt King's own historical reputation," said David J. Garrow, a King biographer who has become a regular critic of the family. "I hope it's a minor impact."

The Children

4 Siblings Follow Diverse Destinies

On Aug. 28, 1963, Dr. King told those gathered for the March on Washington that he had a dream "that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." Since then, those four children, while knit tightly by their past, have traveled varied paths.

Yolanda Denise King, 41, is an actress in Los Angeles who was cast as the daughter of another murdered civil rights leader, Medgar Evers, in Rob Reiner's recent film "Ghosts of Mississippi."

Martin Luther King 3d, 39, is the chairman of Americans United for Affirmative Action, a coalition he founded this year partly to dispel the notion that his father's dream would not have countenanced racial preferences. A former Fulton County commissioner in Atlanta, Mr. King was considered to

have unlimited political potential in the city until 1993, when he ran an aloof campaign for commission chairman and lost in a major upset.

Bernice Albertine King, 34, inherited her father's love of the pulpit. With degrees in law and divinity from Emory University, she is associate pastor of a Baptist church here and has published a book of her sermons and writings.

Like his sisters and brother, Dexter King has never been married and has no children. He dropped out of his father's alma mater, Morehouse College, because of an illness he will not discuss. He said the condition became manageable after he adopted a strict vegan diet and took "a journey of self-discovery."

Though Mrs. King has never moved from the modest brick house she shared with Dr. King in a rough-around-the-edges black neighborhood, Mr. King lives in a gated, integrated condominium complex near downtown. He receives a salary of \$132,300 from the King center and owns a Mercedes-Benz and a Lexus.

A disc jockey in high school and college, Mr. King invested his time and money in media and entertainment ventures until his mother made it clear that she thought he was the most capable of her children to succeed her as the family's leader, spokesman and business manager. That role, while fulfilling now, he said, was "not what I would have necessarily chosen for my life."

The King Center

Mission and Size Are Sharply Cut

In 1989, Mr. King was named the president of the King center, the family-run institute and archive in the Sweet Auburn neighborhood, where Dr. King was born and is now entombed. But Mrs. King retained the powers of chairwoman of a large board that was dominated by civil rights veterans and corporate benefactors, people of her generation, not Mr. King's.

Mr. King is devoted to his mother, so much so that he choked back tears several times while speaking resentfully of his feeling that she had never received proper credit — or

assistance — for raising her family and continuing her husband's work.

But Mr. King, who bears a striking physical resemblance to his father, is also stridently independent and determined to be his own man. Only four months after being named president, he resigned in a dispute with the board and his mother over the control and direction of the King Center. Mr. King was 28 years old.

"He thought she had moved out, and she only intended to move over," said the Rev. Joseph E. Lowery, a King Center board member and the president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Mr. King said at the time, "They passed me a match and not a torch."

In 1994, Mrs. King, now moving toward retirement, prevailed upon the center's board to give her son a second chance and the full authority of being chairman, president and chief executive. This time, he took over with a vengeance.

Mr. King quickly overhauled the board so that family members held a majority of the seats. He orchestrated the premature shutdown of the Martin Luther King Jr. Federal Holiday Commission, which was authorized by Congress and headed by Mrs. King, because he saw it as a fund-raising competitor of the center. When he needed office space for a new aide, he asked his aunt, Christine King Farris, the center's treasurer, to move. When she declined, he had her moved anyway.

Mr. King inherited a history of significant deficits from his mother, who had been unable to raise a sufficient endowment for the center and unwilling to limit its scope.

"We were not being very effective in carrying out our mission and purpose, primarily because we were too broad-based," Mr. King said. "The King center became kind of like an all things to all people organization, and that's always a handicap."

William Walker, the executive director of the center from 1993 to 1995, said the center's fiscal condition was so dire that it had to borrow on property and on the guarantee of board members. Because there was no money to repair leaks in the archive, Mr. Walker

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"We were on a cash-only business with vendors," said Mr. Walker, who is known as Sonny. "The elevator was not working. I used to get knots in my stomach every time I had to make a payroll."

Mr. King has struggled to make the center self-sustaining by vastly reducing its programs. Clearly, he wants to free himself and his siblings from the hat-in-hand fund-raising that so preoccupied his mother. And he wants to make the family independent of the foundation heads, corporate chiefs and movement hangers-on who, he contends, have exploited their ties to his mother for access to government officials, investors and foreign leaders.

"Everybody for the most part that came here to do something did it at her expense," he said, "because they were coming to take more away from the table than they brought."

The center is now a shell of its former self, limited largely to planning commemorations of Dr. King's birthday, maintaining the King crypt, archive and other buildings, operating a gift shop and managing the King family's public appearances and other activities.

Mr. King has cut the staff to 14 from a peak of 70 in 1993. He closed a child care center and has spun off a separate entity, the National Institute for Community Empowerment, to assume control of center programs that taught nonviolence and aided community development projects.

Still, the center, which received nearly half of its \$4.2 million budget from Federal grants in 1996, will run a small operating deficit in 1997, its sixth straight shortfall, Mr. King said. But the deficit, not accounting for depreciation, was whittled to about \$50,000 in 1996 from over \$400,000 in 1992, financial

The Disputes

Battle for Control Provokes Discord

Mr. King's first public relations debacle came quickly, in a feud with the National Park Service. The Government wanted to build a visitors center for its Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site just across Auburn Avenue from the King center. Mr. King objected because he wanted the site for a money-making interactive museum to be called the King Dream Center.

After a prolonged standoff, the park service eventually built its visitors center. But some of its exhibit space remains empty because the King center has declined to lend artifacts like Dr. King's funeral wagon, clothing and Nobel Prize medal, said Troy Lissimore, the historic site's superintendent.

Plans for the \$50 million King Dream Center — mocked by Cynthia Tucker, *The Constitution's* editorial page editor, as "a sort of I Have a Dreamland" — are on hold. Mr. King said public attitudes had become so poisoned in Atlanta that the center might have to be built elsewhere.

In taking charge, Mr. King also tightened the already strict controls on media access to the family. The interview with Mr. King for this article, first requested on April 7, was granted on Aug. 1, and only after lengthy negotiation. Repeated requests for interviews with Mrs. King and her other children were declined.

When Mr. King does grant interviews, he is not hesitant to fire back forcefully at his most eager critics, particularly Mr. Garrow, the biographer, and Ms. Tucker.

Mr. Garrow, he says, bears a grudge for not being selected to edit Dr. King's papers, a job Mr. Garrow says he never pursued. Ms. Tucker, he says, is bitter about her lack of access to the family, a charge she too denies. Mr. King blames her for making it respectable to attack his family, a subject that he acknowledged had been "sacred" in Atlanta. Ms. Tucker said she began writing critical columns when others started discussing "the family's missteps and wasted opportunities."



Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. with his family, above, in December 1966, a little more than a year before he was assassinated. Standing, from left, are Dexter Scott, Yolanda and Martin Luther King 3d. Coretta Scott King held Bernice Albertine. At the King center for nonviolent social change in Atlanta this year, Mrs. King gathered with Martin, left, Bernice and Dexter. A portrait of Dr. King hung behind them.

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After being appointed the executor of the estate in 1991, Mr. King installed Phillip Jones, a college friend with tenacious entrepreneurial instincts, as its manager and gave him a free hand to pursue marketing arrangements that would spread Dr. King's story. Mr. Jones also began to aggressively enforce the estate's licensing rights to Dr. King's words and image. Ultimately, Mr. King and Mr. Jones say, they would like to use the estate's intellectual property rights to put together corporate deals that would generate income for charities that embrace Dr. King's philosophy.

Under Mr. Jones's guidance, the estate has reached financial terms with the filmmaker

Oliver Stone, who may make a movie about Dr. King's life and death. It has agreed to the production of a Dick Clark entertainment show each January to commemorate the King holiday. Mr. Jones also hopes to design software to teach students about nonviolent tactics. And he is working with a Disney subsidiary on a one-hour animated special "about some kids who go back in time and meet a young Martin." It would be shown each year, he said, "like Peanuts Christmas."

The Time Warner Deal Commercialization Draws Criticism

Under the Time Warner agreement, which is expected to bring the estate an estimated \$10 million a year, the company is to produce new books of Dr. King's writings, CD-ROM's of his speeches and memoirs by family members. The deal also includes the creation of a World Wide Web site.

Some civil rights veterans, recalling the self-sacrificing spirit of their movement, find the deal distasteful. But not Andrew J. Young, a King center board member who firmly supports Dexter King.

"People look with a jaundiced eye at the Time Warner deal, but Time Warner will get Martin Luther King's words distributed better than all the nonprofits and churches have done in the last 30 years," said Mr. Young, the former Mayor here and former chief delegate to the United Nations.

"There's nothing wrong with a free-market approach to an essentially humanitarian vision," he added.

But even some of those who do not begrudge the family its right to profit from Dr. King's legacy still question why the King estate has expressed no interest in sharing the proceeds of the deal with the King center or other groups.

Mr. Lowery, of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which was founded by Dr. King and provided him with his primary platform, said his organization should get a share of the marketing proceeds be-



Alan S. Weiner for The New York Times



Lilianna Nieto del Rio for The New York Times

Yolanda Denise King

cause Dr. King's words often were preserved on "tapes made by S.C.L.C. staff and S.C.L.C. equipment."

But Mr. Lowery said he did not object to the Time Warner deal in principle.

"If they're going to get in bed with Time Warner, might as well milk it," he said with a smile. "Yeah, they might as well have a good mattress, soft down pillows, air-conditioned room, all of that."

The estate also licenses the manufacture of King-related items, among them porcelain statuettes and checkbooks. And the Kings have won a reputation for fiercely enforcing their licensing rights, most notably by suing CBS News and USA Today for excerpting or reprinting the "I Have a Dream" speech without asking permission or paying fees. USA Today settled its case in 1993 by paying the estate a \$1,700 licensing fee and legal costs; the suit against CBS is pending.

Because Dr. King was not a government

official, many copyright lawyers contend that the family is well within its rights. But scholars, and not a few civil rights veterans, counter that the family fought for a national holiday to honor Dr. King and that he now belongs to the ages.

Richard Lischer, a Duke University divinity professor, said publication of his book, "The Preacher King" (Oxford University Press, 1995), had been delayed for a year while the estate's literary agent reviewed the manuscript for copyright violations.

"I thought their demands for payment for quotations in a serious study of King were excessive," Professor Lischer said.

The Archive

Restricted Access Angers Scholars

Scholars are also angry about extreme limits on access to the center's archive, perhaps the most extensive collection of civil rights documents in the country. Because of staffing shortages, Mr. King said, the archive is rarely open and then only to those with longstanding requests.

The archive and its King Papers Project have received nearly \$1 million in Federal grants over the years, some of it given expressly to insure the preservation and accessibility of the papers. As early as 1977, a letter to Mrs. King from the National Endowment for the Humanities, one of the grant-giving agencies, specified that the endowment would not support "collections to which scholarly access is restricted to any significant degree or whose physical availability is limited."

Louise Cook, a King center archivist from 1977 to 1987, said Mrs. King had failed to live up to pledges made to the endowment in the 1970's and 1980's that she would move documents from her house to the center. Many of the documents have apparently been moved in recent years.

"Mrs. King always said to me that she felt the only inheritance left by Martin to his children were his papers," Ms. Cook said.

To shed the financial burden of maintaining the archive, Dexter King has opened negotiations with several universities about the possibility of their buying parts of the collection. Because Stanford University is a leading contender, some civil rights veterans

are concerned that the Kings will allow the papers to be moved out of the South.

The Expectations

King Family's Role Is Focus of Tension

Not all of the complaints about the Kings concern money. A number of longtime allies, many of whom question whether James Earl Ray acted alone, cannot understand why the Kings went so far in declaring his innocence.

Dr. Marvin Goldstein, an Atlanta orthodontist who treated the King children and who is vice chairman of the King center board, said he cringed when he heard of Mr. King's comments to Mr. Ray.

"If they reported it accurately," Dr. Goldstein said, "it wasn't a very astute thing to say. Certainly he's guilty of something."

And prominent black Atlantans, including Representative John Lewis and the Rev. Joseph L. Roberts, the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church here, wonder why the Kings have not taken a more visible stand on critical issues that would have presumably concerned Dr. King.

"The center is not addressing the issues of the day," Mr. Roberts said, pointing to the family's low profile on such subjects as church burnings and welfare change.

"I think it is incumbent upon somebody representing the King center to instruct us, albeit conjecturally, on what Dr. King's position might have been on those issues according to his principles."

But Dexter King argues that his father's stature as a global hero has created unrealistic expectations of his family and a skewed notion of its obligations.

"I think it's unfair to take the King family, to take the King center, to take any one entity and say, 'You are responsible for all social change,'" he said.

"I really think it's a double standard that, for some reason with the African-American community, every time you rise to any degree of prominence, you're expected to solve everybody's problems."

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