

# LEGACY TODAY

## INTERVIEW THREAD TWO

### **MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN, Mississippi Director, NAACP, 1965-1968**

“So, he really was a prophet who spoke the truth about who we are and, and I cite often his, his concern that we are going to integrate into a burning house riddled by excessive militarism and materialism, and greed, and that when somebody who heard him that night, ‘cause he was very depressed at the end, I mean, he got nobody -- the country was going to hell. That when they asked him, you know, ‘Well what should we be doing?’ And he said, we, we, we, we all had to kind of become -- raise our voices and, and, and go to a different level of protest.

“And at the end, you look at his speech at the National Cathedral, when he said why America may go to hell, that was his last Sunday sermon, his title that he sent his mama, what he had preached at the cathedral, the, you know -- which was his last one before he went off to Memphis again about the Poor People’s Campaign. And he kept warning America that, you know, the . . . the [Biblical story of] poor man Lazarus and the rich man. That he didn’t go to hell because, you know, he was rich, he went to hell because he refused to see his brother and to respond to his brother. And that America was at risk of going to hell and nothing could be righter, and look at far toward hell we are in terms of where we’re spending now on our military when people are still hungry, that we’ve had some great progress in that area, where people are still jobless, where children still don’t have their basic housing needs met, where homelessness now -- and I have no doubt that if he were here today and we had made -- we have made a lot of progress, but we still have progress to make, he’d be sitting here leading a Poor People’s Campaign.

“But he was right, but he sort of told us that it was -- we had a values crisis. And that -- and I -- at the end a lot of his friends abandoned him because somehow, we’re not supposed to be caring about war, that’s not our civil rights issue, and I looked at all the folk who spoke out against him and thought he had no right to speak out against the war, when the folk were who dying in that war were disproportionately black folk and poor folk and Latino folk. But the loneliness and the -- and when -- what it must have felt like when he was so abandoned by so many -- and told to stay in your place. But I think that, you know, he laid a major foundation for all of us, and his speeches are as prescient today as they were then, we just have to -- we can figure out how to listen to him and follow him rather than just applauding.”

### **RICHARD FERNANDEZ, Church Activist, 1965-1968**

“So, what I have written about Doctor King is, I think the marching orders are first, paying attention to his universalism, paying attention to the fact that we who are advocates on the left side, if I can say that, or on the progressive -- whatever the words are, that we need to get out of our little holes we’ve dug and we need to make common cause with people who’ve dug holes elsewhere. We need to re-institute the word ‘compromise’ as a good word in the American lexicon, and compromise means you don’t get everything you want. So, I’m one of those people who thinks the Democratic Party needs to open its door for people who may not believe in having abortions. It doesn’t mean that has to be their platform, but by God, you read them out of the party and your universalism just took a death blow in other issues. And the reverse is true of people on the other side. I think it’s -- so I’m big on King’s universalism, that that’s the way forward for a democracy that wants to be healthy.

“One of the quotes I always use is, ‘We should [be] far less concerned with the purity of our thoughts and much more concerned with the integrity of our compromises.’ There aren’t many people who believe that on the left or the right. They think purity of their thoughts and getting all that they want is more important than a compromise, and that to me is scary. I think that leads us down a road that is not good for many people, and it just gets worse and I worry about that.”

**CLEVELAND SELLERS, Program Director Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), 1965-1968**

"But I, I, you know, we're still committed and have been committed through the years. Our job was to pass along to the next generation that's going to pick up the torch, our experiences, our stories, and to let them know that Doctor King was a real person. We had leaders in our organization, Ella Baker, who had the same kinds of degrees and knowledge and experiences as Doctor King, so that wasn't any difference. Plus, we had the person who worked on the- on the Poor People's march with Doctor King was Marian Wright Edelman and she did a fantastic job, she was an SNCC'er. And so, we, we kept working on those things. And then we worked on, you know, making sure that people recognized Doctor King with the national holiday and just getting people to begin to appreciate and understand and at the same time bring him down from being that shining star that people had done. They had sterilized him. He didn't have any voice, he didn't have any, any -- you couldn't beat Doctor King because he was so exceptional.

"And what we tell young people is that you can be a Doctor King, a Malcolm X of whatever you want to be. You could be a Ralph Bunche [the first African American Nobel Peace Prize winner] or you could be a -- the [first African American] Supreme Court Justice, Thurgood Marshall, or you can be an astronaut, Mae Jemison [the first African American woman to travel in space] or you could be [civil rights activist] Dorothy Height, you know, with the National Council of Negro Women. There were any number of things that we could do, all we had to do was believe in ourselves and go forward.

"So that's what the experiences were like in, in, in the relationship with Doctor King. I, I, I felt it to my heart, it felt like a part of my arm was cut off, a part of me was cut off. It, it, it hit me very deeply, his assassination. And then with my dear friend and brother Doctor -- I mean, [Ghanaian Prime Minister] Kwame Nkrumah -- I mean, Kwame [Stokely] Carmichael, it was the same kind of feeling. And it was for all of the veterans that I worked with and lived with and all those other kinds of things that we, we want to, you know, hold them in high esteem and say that, you know, we did what we had to do, we did what we could do. Did we get all the way? No, but did we complete some tasks? Yeah.

"We moved the movement from 1960 to, to even now, all the way along, the principles and the guidepost in SNCC are still driving people even today and those principles include the life and the history and the legacy of Doctor Martin Luther King, 'cause he made some ultimate sacrifices along the way in doing that."

