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### Human Rights Hero - Coretta Scott King

Stephen Wermiel

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# humanrights hero

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Time Life Pictures/Getty Images



Coretta Scott King at a political convention in 1988 (top) and in the months following her husband's assassination (right)



crew”—the young people and the unsung leaders who got no recognition from the public. She wrote:

Unfortunately, most young people do not understand nonviolence. Today, they are really turned off by the word “nonviolence.” However, there also are a growing number of young people who realize that nonviolence is an alternative to the violence in their lives and the violence they are victimized by on a daily basis.

In those years, Mrs. King's role as supportive wife was not always an easy one. During the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom (March) in 1963, she was not allowed to march with her husband and the other leaders, as the event's Planning Council had decided that only the top leadership would walk in the March. She wrote, “I must confess, though, that I felt that the involvement in the Movement of some of the wives had been so extensive that they should have been granted the privilege of marching with their husbands and of completely sharing this experience together, as they had shared the dangers and hardships.” Even after the March ended in a huge rally where Dr. King gave his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, Mrs. King was not permitted to confer with President Kennedy along with the March leaders.

After the assassination of her husband in 1968, no one would have faulted Mrs. King for deciding to withdraw from public view to raise her children, who were between ages five and thirteen when Dr. King was killed. But she chose to carry on, making his work her mission. Just days after his death and even before his funeral, she led thou-

sands of marchers through the streets of Memphis in memory of Dr. King but also in support of the local sanitation workers whose strike had brought Dr. King to Memphis. Later that year, she participated in the Poor People's Campaign and March on Washington, making it clear that she intended to continue the work she and her husband had started. And she has.

Mrs. King dedicated herself to establishing the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta. But that was only a start. She has carried the message of peace, nonviolence, and the need to work against injustice to several continents and to all corners of the United States. From protesting apartheid outside the South African Embassy to meeting with Pope John Paul to delivering a sermon in St. Paul's Cathedral in London to working for the commemoration of Dr. King's birthday as a

holiday, Mrs. King has delivered her message. Her influence has been recognized with numerous honorary degrees and the Coretta Scott King Book Award of the American Library Association.

Mrs. King has also demonstrated her ability to see and confront new forms of prejudice, recognizing that the fight for civil rights is far from over. She has spoken out forcefully against discrimination against gays and lesbians. “I appeal to everyone who believes in Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream to

make room at the table of brotherhood and sisterhood for lesbian and gay people,” she declared in a November 2000 speech. “Freedom from discrimination based on sexual orientation is surely a fundamental human right in any great democracy, as much as freedom from racial, religious, gender or ethnic discrimination.”

For all of her extraordinary and continuing efforts that span so many of the interests of the ABA's Section of Individual Rights and Responsibilities, Coretta Scott King is a fitting hero for this issue of *Human Rights* that commemorates the fortieth anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

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*Stephen J. Wermiel is an associate professor of law at American University Washington College of Law. He is a member of the editorial board of Human Rights. Robert E. Stein is an arbitrator and mediator in Washington, D.C. He is a member of the Council of the Section of Individual Rights and Responsibilities.*



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# human **rights hero**

## **Coretta Scott King**

**By Stephen J. Wermiel and  
Robert E. Stein**

If there is one person whose life exemplifies the fight for civil rights in the United States, it is Martin Luther King Jr. If there is one person whose life continues his fight, it is Coretta Scott King, Dr. King's wife and partner, whom we honor in this issue as a Human Rights Hero.

Born in rural Alabama, Mrs. King graduated at the top of her class at Lincoln High School. Just attending the school was no small achievement; it was nine miles away, too far to walk, and so the black children in the area traveled to and from Lincoln High School on a bus driven by Bernice Scott, Mrs. King's mother. After graduating from Lincoln High School, Mrs. King followed her sister to Antioch College in Ohio, where she majored in education and music. The public schools near Antioch would not accept a black student teacher, however, and so she decided to pursue her interest in voice. Upon graduation in 1951, she received a tuition scholarship at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. She struggled to survive, cleaning the stairwells in her boarding house and relying on peanut butter and crackers for most dinners. It was during this time that she met and then married Martin Luther King Jr., who was a doctoral student in theology at Boston University.

In 1954 the Kings moved to Montgomery, Alabama, where Dr. King began his career as pastor. Mrs. King was a full and active partner in her husband's civil rights work,



Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King at a rally from Selma to Montgomery in March 1965 in support of black voting rights

marching with him, speaking on his behalf, and becoming active in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. At the same time, she raised four children and organized and performed as a vocalist at fund-raising events. It was a busy and dangerous time. The family's house was bombed in 1956, and she was on constant alert for her children and husband's safety. After they relocated to Atlanta in 1960, she taught voice at Morris Brown College in addition to her other activities.

Mrs. King brought her own perspective to the civil rights movement. In her book entitled *My Life with Martin Luther King Jr.*, she noted that what made the civil rights movement great was not just its leaders, but the "ground

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