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Author brings wife of Martin Luther King Jr. to life

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DESERT ROSE: THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF CORETTA SCOTT KING

By Edythe Scott Bagley with Joe Hilley
Published by University of Alabama Press, $34.95

As a sophomore in high school I attended the wake of Coretta Scott King. I remember my mother giving me bits and pieces of her legacy. Now, through *Desert Rose*, by Coretta?s sister Edythe Scott Bagley, I have gained a deeper understanding. I can contemplate ways to emulate her.

Edythe Bagley was the second-oldest child of four siblings who included Eunice, Coretta and Obie Leonard, all born in Perry County, Ala. Their father, Obie Scott, was a self-motivated entrepreneur who distributed logs and lumber to various sawmills in the South. Their mother, Bernice McMurry, was a woman knowledgeable in various trades, such as transportation and barbering, and she served as an active member of her church choir. Bagley writes, ?We grew up in an atmosphere in which the standard for achievement was one?s own potential rather than some other person?s accomplishments.?

Bagley and Coretta Scott won scholarships to attend Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. Bagley tells us that Coretta Scott ?came to college having already achieved the central goal of education. She had discovered that learning is a lifelong process.? While there, Coretta Scott participated in the Paul Robeson leadership program -- and Robeson became one among many to motivate her involvement in the fight for social justice.

This was a different era, even at the progressive Antioch College. The students had similar goals to Coretta?s when it came to excelling in education, but on the social level, such as dating, Coretta kept to childhood friends or individuals outside of Antioch.

This was the late 1940s. Coretta said Antioch?s ?emotional and social maturity still lags far behind our intellectual acceptance of racial equality.?

Equally hurtful, close to her 1951 graduation in education and music, Coretta Scott asked to practice teach at Yellow Springs public schools like the rest of her class peers. However, the Antioch College president, Douglas McGregor, refused and suggested she teach in the all-black public school.

This rebuttal was devastating for Coretta Scott. That a college of such liberal stature would react so stereotypically had never occurred to her. Nonetheless, she had courageously thrived at a predominately white institution despite the injustices.

As a soprano artist headed to the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, she had structured her own pedagogical techniques to instruct youth, and she shared her talent through recitals and concerts on and off campus. It was in Boston in 1952 that she would meet the young preacher Martin Luther King Jr. They wed in 1953 and had four children: Dexter, Yolanda, Martin Luther King III and Bernice.

Typically, when you imagine someone with an incredible legacy, you begin to give them almost superhuman qualities. However, one of Coretta Scott King?s most human and humane qualities was her love of public service through her music and her promotion of social justice. Bagley writes, ?She believed music was a means not just of conveying a message, but of reaching people with that message at a motivational level -- touching their hearts in a way that moved them to action.?

Bagley does not address Coretta Scott King?s perspective on where her husband fell short. Instead, she creates a timeline of the important events that Coretta and Martin shared during the civil rights movement, such as the 1963 ?Letter from Birmingham Jail? and the 1955-56 Montgomery Bus Boycott.

I admired how Bagley addresses her sister?s perspective 38 years after her husband?s assassination. ?During the years following his death, she poured her heart and soul into pursuing the cause of economic and social justice and the promotion of nonviolent means to achieve that end.?

I read *Desert Rose* right after completing my bachelor?s degree at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass. My mind took me on a mission of self-renewal. Out of habit, prior to reading a piece of literature, especially a biography, I create my own story of expectation: an expectation of sharing an individual?s shoes filled with experiences beyond my comprehension in the hope of gaining a better understanding of not only an iconic individual, but of myself as well. I was just at the right phase of my life to read it. What better way to begin my life after college than with an empowering narrative of the past to spring me forward.

Further education would be my opportunity to continue this fight for social justice, through awareness, affirmation and action -- to develop a program that empowers youth with multicultural competency and insights as they strive to shape their worldview, just as Coretta Scott King empowered me.

King, a woman of promise and great distinction, comes alive in her sister?s words.

[Adrienne Christina Shaw is a native of Stone Mountain, Ga. She is working as a pharmacy technician as she prepares for a pharmacy graduate program.]

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