

Moneta Sleet Jr.

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By Robert Mcg. Thomas Jr.

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Moneta Sleet Jr., who brought his camera to a revolution and ended up capturing many of the images that defined the struggle for racial equality in the United States and Africa, died on Monday at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center. He was 70 and best known for his Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of the funeral of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

His family said the cause was cancer, a disease that was diagnosed when he returned to his home in Baldwin, L.I., after covering the Olympics for his longtime employer, Ebony magazine.

From the time he was sent to Montgomery, Ala., in 1955 to cover an unlikely boycott organized by a young minister named Martin Luther King Jr. until long after he captured what became the signature moment of Dr. King's funeral in Atlanta in 1968, Mr. Sleet was a gentle, ubiquitous presence in the civil rights struggle in the United States and a fixture at independence ceremonies and celebrations in Africa.

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In a profession whose practitioners are expected to bring a certain detachment to their work, Mr. Sleet saw no reason to apologize for his commitment to the cause he covered or for his emotional involvement with those he photographed.

"I wasn't there as an objective reporter," he once said. "I had something to say and was trying to show one side of it. We didn't have any problems finding the other side."

In the era of civil rights marches, Mr. Sleet tended to march double-time, once estimating that he had walked 100 miles during the 50-mile march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965 because he kept walking back and forth along the line of march to take photographs.

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Mr. Sleet was a native of Owensboro, Ky., and his father was the business manager at Western Kentucky State College in Paducah. He got his first box camera as a child but did not think of becoming a professional photographer until he went to Kentucky State College in Frankfort. Initially a business major, he decided to switch to photography after getting a job as an assistant at a commercial studio operated by a college dean.

Mr. Sleet, whose education was interrupted by Army duty in World War II, later studied at the School of Modern Photography in New York and received a master's degree in journalism from New York University. After a brief stint as a sportswriter for *The Amsterdam News* in 1950, he joined *Our World*, a popular black picture magazine. When it folded in 1955, he joined *Ebony*, the black-owned monthly based in Chicago.

Although he was based in New York, Mr. Sleet spent a good deal of his career on the road, photographing virtually every black head of state in Africa, for example, and crisscrossing the South with Dr. King and other civil rights leaders.

Known for his perpetual optimism, his ever-present smile and his knack for making others smile even when they didn't feel like it, Mr. Sleet had such a gentle, engaging personality that he captivated the civil rights leaders and other black celebrities he covered.

It was not unusual for those he had covered to request -- or insist -- that Mr. Sleet be assigned the next time they agreed to be interviewed by *Ebony*.

In 1968, when Mrs. Coretta Scott King learned that the small pool of photographers covering her husband's funeral did not include a black photographer, she sent out word that if Mr. Sleet were not allowed in the church and given a choice vantage point, there would be no

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photographers.

In the end, Mr. Sleet, who had also been chosen to cover Dr. King's receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, had what turned out to be the best position of all. His photograph showing Dr. King's 5-year-old daughter, Bernice, lying across her mother's lap and looking hauntingly toward the camera was considered such a powerful image that it was transmitted nationwide by The Associated Press and won Mr. Sleet a Pulitzer Prize for journalism, the first received by a black journalist.

For all his pictures of celebrities and famous events, like the 1963 march on Washington, Mr. Sleet always had an eye for the quiet moment and the little people, especially children, and a certain sense of history.

When an exhibition of his work was assembled in 1986 and displayed at major museums, along with the pictures of the likes of Mohammed Ali, Haile Selassie, Stevie Wonder (without his dark glasses), Jomo Kenyatta and Billie Holiday was one of a sign in Florida advertising a coin laundry as "especially for colored folks."

"A lot of people have forgotten those days," he said, "and I don't think they ever should."

He is survived by his wife, Juanita; two sons, Gregory, the United States Attorney for Delaware, who lives in Wilmington, and Michael, who lives in a group home for the retarded in Bayville, L.I.; a daughter, Lisa, of Baldwin; a sister, Emmy Lou Wilson of Detroit, and three grandchildren.