



Obituaries

Dorothy Cotton, civil rights leader and confidante to Martin Luther King Jr., dies at 88

by [Harrison Smith](#) June 12 [✉Email the author](#)

Late one night in May 1964, Dorothy Cotton stood inside a Methodist church and exhorted a crowd of civil rights marchers to take to the streets with love, not hate. A few blocks away, surrounding the central square in St. Augustine, Fla., was a crowd of about 100 white men and boys, a group of purported Ku Klux Klan members who carried sticks or makeshift clubs, hiding broom handles down their pant legs.

“Don’t judge them by the color of their skin — don’t think of them as white people, but as people with guilt in their souls,” said Ms. Cotton, one of a handful of women in the top ranks of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Amid ongoing debate over the Civil Rights Act in Washington, Ms. Cotton led 217 marchers through the streets and past the city’s old slave market, where the demonstrators were met by jeers, howling police dogs and sporadic violence.

On that night, according to a [subsequent report](#) in the Daytona Beach Evening News, no one was killed. Ms. Cotton then led the group in song when they returned to the church.

“This was about the roughest city we’ve had — 45 straight nights of beatings and intimidation,” she [later said](#), recalling the weeks-long protest against segregation. “In church every night we’d see people sitting there with bandages on. Some would sit with shotguns between their legs. . . . We sang before every night we went out to get up our courage. . . . After we were attacked we’d come back to the church, and somehow always we’d come back bleeding, and singing.”

While the male leaders of the SCLC have long been heralded for their work in fighting for racial equality, Ms. Cotton played a crucial — if often overlooked — role in the Atlanta-based organization, leading an education program credited with teaching thousands of African Americans about their basic rights of citizenship.

She also became one of the closest confidantes of King, said historian [David J. Garrow](#), who received the Pulitzer Prize for his 1986 biography of King, “Bearing the Cross.” “In the last five years of his life, no one was closer to or more emotionally supportive of Dr. King than Dorothy,” Garrow said in a phone interview.

Ms. Cotton died June 10 at a retirement community in Ithaca, N.Y., one day after celebrating her 88th birthday. The [Dorothy Cotton Institute](#), a project of the Center for Transformative Action at Cornell University, announced the death but did not give a precise cause.

Raised in a shotgun shack in the segregated South, Ms. Cotton was a protege of Wyatt Tee Walker, a pastor in Petersburg, Va., who led the local chapter of the NAACP and became a prominent champion of civil rights in Virginia. Walker, who [died in January](#), was named executive director of the SCLC in 1960. Cotton followed him to Atlanta and joined the organization’s staff. In a 2011 interview with the [Southern Oral History Program](#), Ms. Cotton recalled that she promised her husband, George Cotton, that the new job would take her away from home for three months. “But I stayed twenty-three years,” she said. “The Movement became my life.” Their marriage ended in divorce.

A onetime teacher, Ms. Cotton received a master’s degree in speech therapy from Boston University and was charged with leading the SCLC’s education department, which became known as the Citizenship Education Program. The position made her the only woman in the organization’s executive staff.

“I remember one meeting, Martin said, ‘Dorothy, get me a cup of coffee.’ She said, ‘No, I won’t get you a cup of coffee,’ ” Andrew Young, a fellow SCLC official who became the organization’s executive director and later mayor of Atlanta, [told the Atlanta Journal-Constitution](#). “She was constantly rebelling against the role of being made a second-class citizen. She would tell Dr. King no all the time. So I got the coffee.”

Ms. Cotton’s education division was modeled in large part after teaching programs by Esau Jenkins, who worked with children on the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia, and organizer Septima Clark, an instructor at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee who became the Citizenship Education Program’s supervisor of teacher training.

With Clark and Young, Ms. Cotton led monthly five-day workshops in which as many as 60 people studied the U.S. Constitution and African American history, learned how to read a voting ballot and organize credit unions, were taught the ins-and-outs of community activism, and — not infrequently — danced or played volleyball with a visiting King.

“In short, the purpose of the CEP class is to give instruction necessary for meaningful existence and participation in a democratic society,” read [one SCLC pamphlet](#) from the mid-1960s. “Most important,” the document continued, was the program’s goal of helping participants “realize that THEY THEMSELVES CAN THINK, MAKE DECISIONS, AND THEN ACT.”

Individuals who attended the workshops returned home to teach citizenship classes of their own. By the mid-1960s, according to one SCLC estimate, 2,600 graduates had led workshops that were “attended by 23,000 others.”

Among the attendees was [Charles Steele Jr.](#), who went to a workshop as a teenager in Tuscaloosa, Ala., and is now president of the SCLC. “It meant everything to me,” he said in a phone interview, recalling that its lessons helped steer him toward a life of activism.

Dorothy Lee Foreman was born in Goldsboro, N.C., on June 9, 1930. She was 3 when her mother died; she and her three sisters were raised by her father, a strict disciplinarian who worked at a tobacco factory.

In the oral history, Ms. Cotton recalled that her father had nothing more than a third-grade education, and she had not expected to attend college until a well-connected high school English teacher secured a place for her at Shaw University, a historically black college in North Carolina. She supported herself through school by working as a housekeeper for the university president; when the president left to become head of Virginia State College, near Petersburg, Ms. Cotton transferred, as well.

She graduated with a bachelor’s degree in English and library science in 1955 and received her master’s degree five years later, shortly after meeting King when he was a guest speaker at Walker’s church.

With [James Bevel](#), Ms. Cotton successfully encouraged King to incorporate young African Americans into their [1963 campaign](#) to end segregation in Birmingham, Ala. She also became a stabilizing force at the SCLC, helping keep the peace between “highly emotional” figures such as Bevel, [Hosea Williams](#), and Jesse Jackson, said Garrow, the King biographer.

“On some occasions,” he added, “Bevel, Hosea, Jesse could do great things, but they were repeatedly extremely difficult for King to manage. King didn’t like having to deal with difficult situations, and both Dorothy and Andy Young were the real interpersonal glue that held things together and gave King emotional support.”

Ms. Cotton remained with the SCLC for three years after King’s assassination on April 4, 1968, according to [a biography](#) by the Cotton Institute, which Ms. Cotton co-founded to foster new leaders for “a global human rights movement.”

She became a regional director for the federal volunteer agency ACTION under President Jimmy Carter, and she was vice president for field operations at the King Center for Nonviolent Social Change before serving as director of student activities at Cornell.

She later started a consulting company that gave seminars on social change and wrote a 2012 memoir, “If Your Back’s Not Bent,” that took its title from a comment King made in an education workshop: “Nobody can ride your back if your back’s not bent.”

Ms. Cotton, who leaves no immediate survivors, accompanied King to Oslo when he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. It was, she [told The Washington Post](#) two decades later, an incredible departure from the marches she had led earlier that year, in St. Augustine and later in Alabama.

“I remember being overcome and crying in the ceremony, all dressed up in my new rose-colored satin suit. Dr. King made his Nobel speech, and they played the music from ‘Porgy and Bess,’ and I heard that music and I just cried. And I realized the reason I cried and was so overcome was that just days before we had been in Birmingham in our demonstration clothes with the dogs and fire hoses. And there we were in Oslo, wined and dined by the queen.”

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 **11 Comments**

Harrison Smith is a reporter on The Washington Post's obituaries desk. Since joining the obituaries section in 2015, he has profiled big-game hunters, fallen dictators and Olympic champions. He sometimes covers the living as well, and previously co-founded the South Side Weekly, a community newspaper in Chicago.

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