KEEPING A PROMISE: THE TRIALS OF BYRON DE LA BECKWITH

Good Afternoon.

This is a very personal journey for me. On June 12, 1963, my life changed. It was the first hour of my first day on the campus of Alcorn A&M College, when this young man dressed in his football gear ran up to where freshmen girls were congregated; the young men would come so they could look us over deciding whom to pursue. This young man told me that I should move away from that light pole I was leaning on or I might get shocked. Little did I know meeting him would be the shock of my life.

What I have been able to do, what my family has undergone, reaching out to others who have also suffered, is because of a promise I made to Medgar just a few hours before his death. We knew well that because of the challenge he was making to the state he would soon lose his life. He had to do what he did, and not be persuaded by me or anyone else to walk away from the danger. I promised him that if anything happened to him, I would do everything in my power to see that justice was done.

I hope you can imagine the time—young people in concentration camps, behind barbed wire, police spitting in their food and saying, “Eat that!” People were losing their

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1 Myrlie Evers-Williams is a longtime civil rights activist, the first full-time chairman of the NAACP and the widow of civil rights leader Medgar Evers, who was assassinated in 1963. From the NAACP field office in Jackson, Mississippi, Medgar Evers investigated violent crimes against blacks and led efforts to have James Meredith admitted to the University of Mississippi. Evers-Williams was chairman of the NAACP from 1995 to 1998. She is credited with spearheading the operations that restored the association to its original status as the premier civil rights organization in America. She is the author of *For Us, the Living* (1967) and *Watch Me Fly: What I Learned On the Way to Becoming the Woman I Was Meant to Be* (1999).
homes because they were attempting to register to vote, or simply going to NAACP meetings to sing songs quietly. We knew full well that, at any moment, this man who stood as the person to eliminate, could possibly be eliminated. This was something that Medgar and I accepted.

But I made a promise. I don’t like to make promises, because they can be hard to carry out. But I intended to keep my promise. You know the story. Medgar pulled into the driveway, forgetting to get out on the opposite side of where the bushes are, where anyone could hide. He was carrying an armful of white t-shirts with the slogan, “Jim Crow Must Go.”

Shots rang out. He did not fall. He held on to the t-shirts, dragged himself around the cars and fell face first at the steps of our front door. Why would a man who knew he was putting his life on the line keep doing what he did? Because he believed, as Roy Wilkins said at his funeral at Arlington, he believed in his country. Now the question is, does his country believe in him?

As a young man, Medgar would go through fields near his home. He commented about the bloody clothes of a friend of his father’s who had been lynched. What could he do about it, he wondered. Join the Army, and perhaps become a man, to himself and in the eyes of America. He came back from the service and found that he was still a second-class citizen. He decided to do something about it. He was steeped in the religious upbringing of his mother, who believed that justice would be done, and of his father, called “Crazy Jim,” who insisted that his wife and children walk on the sidewalk and not in the street, as was required of blacks at that time. Daddy Jim, Crazy Jim, said, “You must be able to register and to vote.” That was the upbringing Medgar Evers had.
He encouraged instructors to teach about civic engagement, and was called a troublemaker. But that did not deter him.

After graduation, we moved to an all-Negro town in Mississippi called Mound Bayou, which was organized by slaves, where one had at least a sense of freedom. He applied for admission to the Law School at the University of Mississippi. I often read that he “helped Meredith get into Ole Miss.” But what is left out of that story is that Medgar was the first Black known to apply, and that he then helped James Meredith become a part of the student body.

I say this is a personal thing, and I told my friend Jerry, pull my coattail if you will. There is something about being the first that means you have to fight to get people to realize that you were the first.

Medgar was not the first person to lose his life, but he was the first well-known person to give his life in Mississippi. At least, that’s when the cotton curtain began to open. Not to take away anything from those who gave their lives willingly for us to benefit. But it became imperative to see that the memory of my man stayed alive. This man lived, believed, gave, died, and I want to see something else happen as a result of that.

My search for that recognition for Medgar has gone on for years. That leads us to the murder trial. I felt that at some point the man who pulled the trigger would be found, and he was. I also felt that something would come from his apprehension—it would not happen again. That was wishful thinking. But at least there was a small voice that said, “We have to do something.”
As for the first trial, we were shocked that there was a first trial, because this was unheard of in Mississippi. The District Attorney invited me into his office, to see what I knew, and to go over my testimony for the trial. I remember so well sitting in the chair, and asking him, “How will you address me on the stand?” He gazed at me—this nasty man—and turned around in his chair, reflected on something out the window, and said, “You were born here and lived here all your life. When in Rome, we do as Romans do. I said to him, “My husband gave his life so I and other women could be treated fairly. Please address as Mrs. or Miss.” He said, “I advise you not to do that,” and I replied that, if he called me anything other than Mrs. Evers, I would address that in court. What happened? He never called me anything! But that was the first challenge of sorts, to that system.

While I sat in the seat testifying, nervous but determined to carry through, the doors opened. It was Governor Ross Barnett who walked up, stood and looked at me, turned on his heels, slapped the defendant, Beckwith, on the back, shook his hand, and began to converse with him. If ever there was a signal to the jury, “Don’t mess with this man,” that was it. It was an insult if ever there was one. But we are accustomed to insults so we keep going.

Over the years I would return to Mississippi and I would ask, “Have you heard anything about this man Beckwith, where is he, has he done anything else?” I was told that I was a fool, pursuing something that would not happen and that I should let it go. As a result of my making a nuisance of myself, the day finally came. Something did happen. The first trial resulted in a hung jury and Beckwith was released. But on the way to the car, he began to talk, to brag. Some people cannot keep their mouths shut. I
said to myself, “One day he is going to let it slip.” He got in his car and there was a parade on the highway from Jackson to Greenwood to Greenville. There was a gubernatorial race; the prosecuting attorney in the trial was running for governor, and Beckwith was running for lieutenant governor.

Time passed, and there was a second trial and then a third trial.\textsuperscript{2} In the first trial, when the jury was being selected, I sat in the courtroom alone. One side was filled with Beckwith’s friends. I sat alone. People were afraid to come out, to be involved. One young man said, “You have no one to sit with. I will sit with you.” He would sit awhile and then leave.

We got to the trial date, which was never announced. Again, one side filled with Beckwith friends. The other side, where were we? Where were we? I asked a friend at Tougaloo to get students there to fill up my side of the room until it was packed. In my suspicious nature, I would look behind me, and there were always two people seated behind me with overcoats. I found out they were FBI, supposedly there for support.

The community finally began to rally. There were interviews by local stations questioning young teens about their thoughts, and some said, as others do, that the perpetrators are old. The man is old. We should not bring up all these old cases. We should just let them die. I admit to you I had the overwhelming urge to find those young people and do as my grandmother did to me—grab them by shoulders and make them sit and listen to wisdom. It is so pitiful that they did not know or care. And we are not getting over to our young people all that we have been through, are still going through. Of how the actions of those brave people were helping them at that moment, and in the future.

\textsuperscript{2}Beckwith v. State, conviction aff’d, 707 So.2d 547 (Miss. 1997).
I could not help remembering the last time I met with the District Attorney, when I had to meet him again to pursue the case. This time I felt I needed someone with me to be a witness. I called on Morris Dees, a dear friend, but he was booked solid. I said, okay, I would take another friend with me. But shortly after, Morris Dees took a plane to be there with me. We met with the District Attorney and the Assistant District Attorney, and once again, it was so difficult for that DA to call me Mrs. Evers. The DA said that nothing could be done, that they didn’t have any evidence. “The case is too old; we will never be able to convince a court to move ahead with it.” Then the DA said “This is all we have on the case: a folder with four sheets of paper.” I said, “That’s okay, we will find a way.” Then Jerry Mitchell told me that the prosecutor claimed they could not find the transcript of the previous trial. I called Jerry, and I said, “I have the three volumes of the trial transcript.” I had been given the three-volume transcript and kept it in a trunk. Jerry met me at the airport in Jackson with a photographer, and there was no denying that the DA’s office did receive the transcript.

It’s not easy. There are so many things in all these cases that could turn it around, where we could not be victorious. In the last trial, after the closing arguments, we thought we had the weekend free. Volunteers began to feel something was changing and there was the possibility of a conviction. Then we received a call that the jury was back, and that we had five minutes to get to the courthouse. We were hardly ready. For us ladies, our hair was in rollers, we had no makeup on, and our clothes were not coordinated. But we jumped into our clothes and rushed off to the courthouse. People who heard on the radio or by word of mouth also rushed down to the courthouse.
You could hear the footsteps. We were seated, and the guilty verdict was read. How did I feel at that moment? I can honestly say that every bit of anger, every bit of hatred, of fear, escaped from every pore of my body when that verdict was read, and I felt free. But I also felt that America, my people, all people, were freer when that verdict was read.

Reporters from around the world asked questions. “How do you feel?” they asked. All I could say was, “Medgar, I kept my promise. It took thirty-plus years, but I kept my promise. Hopefully others will also benefit from that promise as well.” The fear, the anger, and the willingness to live a full life, all of those things were coming together, and I felt, “I have done my job.”

I kept my promise to Medgar, but my job was not finished, because more needed to be done. As we meet here, and talk about how to go about it, I have another concern. How do we, who have been there, and are dying off now, how do we, those who are the generations behind me, and behind them, transfer the dedication, the knowledge, the appreciation of all that has gone on before, to a generation now where so many see it as something long ago that does not impact them at all.

We not only have to remember the past, we also have to make the link to the next generation coming along. If we don’t, we will find ourselves in another kind of civil war, another kind of horror that we will not know how to take care of. As someone said, community is so important. We must have a sense of that, of protecting our rights, of saying, “One who has will share with one who does not.” And that includes knowledge. A promise was made; a promise was kept. Perseverance paid, and I look at my three
children, one deceased now, and still see the agony and pain, and how they have been shaped and had to deal with the loss of their father.

And I realize we are not the only ones. Please don’t misunderstand me, pouring my heart out as one person, one family. So many brothers have been damaged, and the next person, Bettie Dahmer, is a wonderful representative of what can happen out of something very difficult.

I listened when Rita said that life has been a joy. I can say life has been pain, but also joy. And I believe that with each thing that hurts us, if we learn to move beyond that, we become stronger, wiser, and downright bad. And no one had better mess with us, because through the fire, we become strong, gain wisdom, strength, and endurance.

To see that this America does what she says she would do, when everyone has the opportunity to do whatever her womanhood or his manhood said could be.

Let us see that this country keeps that promise. I thank you.