

# The Woman I Was Meant To Be

## Behind the History of Myrlie Evers-Williams

Kyla Merwin



Meet your neighbor, Central Oregon: one of the most influential, fascinating and powerful women of the 20th century - Myrlie Evers-Williams. Mrs. Evers-Williams is the former head of the NAACP and widow of slain civil rights leader Medgar Evers. She is a woman with a strong history of success in corporate management, experience in politics, and the governance of non-profits. She is twice married, twice widowed, a mother, and a grandmother. She is an author, public speaker and the recipient of an exhausting list of honorary degrees, commendations and national honors and awards. She is your neighbor.

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Similarly, Mrs. Evers-Williams fought with persistence and faith for over 30 years to finally bring her husband's killer, Byron De La Beckwith, to justice. Two different families - two measures of justice. The King and Evers families share tragedy, support, and now, vindication.

"Those of us in the movement," said Evers-Williams, "and deeply involved in the movement - have known from the very beginning that there was a conspiracy to eliminate not only King, but Medgar. Medgar's death was not the result of a single person. I was able to get some proof of a conspiracy. That's how we actually got this third trial started."

"We all knew that there was a conspiracy to kill King and other leaders. When someone becomes so powerful that they can pull the number of people that King did to change society you know they are going to be eliminated. He knew it. Coretta King knew it. The children probably knew it. Medgar knew it. I knew it. Our children probably knew that they were going to lose their dad. They knew the dangers because Medgar talked about it. When there is someone powerful enough to have the support that those men had, even Malcolm... there will always be an effort to eliminate that person."

"I've heard people say, 'Oh you people,' meaning blacks, 'are so suspicious.' We have every right to be suspicious. But to be able to prove these things - that's the difficult thing. You know within your heart of hearts that there is a conspiracy. It is amazing what power can do for good and for evil."

Perseverance in the pursuit of justice is important to Evers-Williams. It has been her constant belief that eventually the people that she knew to be guilty of hate crimes during the

bring back their loved ones - can be a tremendous cleansing process bringing healing and a sense of closure on a tragic past.

"My daughter has just talked to Yolanda King - their eldest daughter, just from what she said I know how cleansing emotionally, how healing it was [for the King family]. Closure came after all of those years. My children and I were in the courtroom when the verdict was read [against Byron De La Beckwith VI]. I said, 'I'm free.' They said, 'Mom, we feel free, too.' We were finally free."

"You have to leave the negative aspect of it behind and look at that long road down the future and what kind of impact - positive impact - that correcting these evils will have on the population as a whole."

The widows of Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X came together in support and encouragement over the many years of loss and perseverance and have formed what Evers-Williams called, "a unique little club."

"Betty Shabazz is gone now," said Evers-Williams, "and that still hurts, because it was the three of us. I have not spoken with Coretta Scott King yet [about the King conspiracy ruling] - which I will do very soon... just to let her know - as we have said many times on a very personal, female, sister to sister interaction, 'You go girl. You do it.' She was there to support me. I'm there to support her."

### A NEW CENTURY

Evers-Williams looks back over the last century and sees great change. She also sees a continuity of challenges in our society, and advocates strongly for new, creative, and "high tech" approaches to solving old problems. She also maintains that the focus of attention needs to be in our own back yard, and in our own hearts.

**I see a bright future for us ... Not just as we grow economically and more and more people become wealthy in this country, but as we become wealthy from within as well**

are still there. But if I look back at what was, and look at where we are today, I know there is hope. I know there is promise. I hear so much criticism of our young people. Forget color, just youth. But then I look around and I see those that are excelling in their curriculum. Those who are actively involved in some volunteer participation in their community."

With all of the problems we have with human rights in our countries, it can be a little disconcerting to Evers-Williams when the United States begins to preach to other countries, such as China, "We still are not doing what we should be doing here. Look at poverty. That's still a problem. Children who are hungry. What I'm trying to say is that the issues that we had in the past century are moving right on over into [this] one. But how creative are we going to be? How dedicated are we going to be? How forceful are we going to be in addressing these issues in another way."

Yet, she remains optimistic, "I see a bright future for us. But it's a challenge, and if we can look at these issues as challenges and address them in different ways than we have in the past, then we are on our way. Not just as we grow economically and more and more people become wealthy in this country, but that we become wealthy from within as well."

### THE MEDGAR-EVERS INSTITUTE

Evers-Williams' current project is the Medgar Evers Institute, a think tank to educate young people in leadership skills and to bring the forgotten history of the civil rights movement in Mississippi to its children. Evers-Williams has been devoting practically all of her time to this project, she says, which has been a dream of hers for many years.

"I hope to make an impact and a change," said Evers-Williams. "In order to build a living memorial to Medgar that will encompass the

issues of [the past] century, but move us into the next one with a high tech approach to some of these same problems is what I hope to do."

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it. Our children probably knew that they were going to lose their dad. They knew the dangers because Medgar talked about it. When there is someone powerful enough to have the support that those men had, even Malcolm... there will always be an effort to eliminate that person."

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Perseverance in the pursuit of justice is important to Evers-Williams. It has been her constant belief that eventually the people that she knew to be guilty of hate crimes during the civil rights era would finally be tried. After thirty years this is finally a reality. "It's something that you know. And you don't let go if you believe in something. You don't let go that one day the truth will come out. And they didn't. And I didn't. I look at what has happened in my state of Mississippi, of all of the civil right cases that are being re-tried now. And people, who we all knew were guilty, are being convicted."

Evers-Williams attests that this kind of perseverance for justice - though it will never

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In a recent interview Mrs. Evers-Williams talked about the dawn of the new century, living in the community of Bend, her most recent project, the assassinations of her husband and of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the liberation of the woman she is - behind the public image.

#### THE WIDOW OF

In December of 1999, a jury in Memphis, Tennessee ruled that the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. was a conspiracy and that James Earl Ray did not act alone. The King Family had pressed for this trial for 31 years.

## I see a bright future for us... Not just as we grow economically and more and more people become wealthy in this country, but as we become wealthy from within as well

"I consider myself so fortunate to be born when I was," Evers-Williams says. "To have seen the numerous changes take place in our society, in American society as well as some things on an international basis. Going from the human rights - from slavery - to where we are today."

"You know as I stop and I ponder the future I see basically the same challenges - and I would like to call them challenges instead of problems. A little bit different but still there. I think we have to have different approaches to some of the same problems."

Let me narrow it to civil rights. We are still having problems with race! It is still a problem! Hatred is still there - ugly - because of the color of one's skin. Hatred is there for whatever reason that we find with our young people today. The killing - these negative human elements

issues of [the past] century, but move us into the next one with a high tech approach to some of these same problems is what I hope to do."

"Mississippi seems to be the place to have the institute begin. Mississippi was Medgar's birth home as well as mine. He needs to be remembered there. That needs to be the spring board for the other things. There is a lack of leadership development among our youth in that state. So hopefully we would be able to solve it that way. The state is growing. We have some major corporations there. The academic institutions of higher learning are very interested in it."

Myrlie Evers-Williams is dismayed that there are only brief mentions of Mississippi's role in the civil rights movements in archives and museums in the south. "Even with the role that

|      |                                                            |      |                                                          |      |                                                                                                   |
|------|------------------------------------------------------------|------|----------------------------------------------------------|------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1933 | Born in Vicksburg, Mississippi                             | 1967 | Published, <i>For Us The Living</i>                      | 1994 | Guilty verdict of Byron De La Beckwith VI                                                         |
| 1950 | Honor student at Alcorn A & M College, Lorman, Mississippi | 1968 | Bachelor of Arts - Pamona College                        | 1995 | Elected Chairman of the NAACP                                                                     |
| 1951 | Married Medgar Evers                                       | 1968 | Contributing Editor, Ladies Home Journal                 | 1995 | Death of Walter Edward Williams                                                                   |
| 1953 | Birth of son, Darrell Kenyatta Evers                       | 1968 | Director of Planning and Development, Claremont Colleges | 1998 | Established Medgar Evers Institute                                                                |
| 1954 | Birth of daughter, Reena Denise Evers                      | 1969 | Delegate to Vietnam War Peace Talks in Paris             | 1999 | Published, <i>Watch Me Fly, What I Learned on the Way to Becoming the Woman I was Meant to Be</i> |
| 1960 | Birth of son, James Van Dyke Evers                         | 1970 | Ran for Congress                                         |      |                                                                                                   |
| 1963 | Assassination of Medgar Evers                              | 1973 | Vice President for Advertising & Publicity,              |      |                                                                                                   |
|      |                                                            |      |                                                          | 1975 | Seligman & Latz, Inc. National Director for Community Affairs, Atlantic Richfield Company (ARCO)  |
|      |                                                            |      |                                                          | 1976 | Married Walter Edward Williams                                                                    |
|      |                                                            |      |                                                          | 1976 | Director of Consumer Affairs, ARCO                                                                |
|      |                                                            |      |                                                          | 1987 | Ran for Los Angeles City Council                                                                  |
|      |                                                            |      |                                                          | 1987 | Commissioner, Los Angeles Board of Public Works                                                   |



## IN COMMUNITY

Evers-Williams moved to Central Oregon in 1989 with her second husband Walter Williams. An incident at a gas station in Los Angeles, where her husband was approached by a gunman wanting to steal his car, told them it was time to look for a home in the Pacific Northwest. On a trip through Bend (on their way to the more obvious cities of Portland and Seattle) they were drawn in, and held, by the land.

"I fell in love with the landscape, the cleanliness of the area, particularly the air, the wonderful water... We found the people to be very friendly... We saw a house just driving around, and I said to Walter, 'Wait. Let's see what's happening here.' The people were just putting up the *For Sale* sign. We drove down and I said, 'That's it.' There

was just something about that area that was so serene, that was so peaceful: the circular driveway, the huge trees. I knew from the moment I saw that piece of property, without even going into it. There was something about the mountains, the trees, the breeze. It just said, peace. It said serenity. We both looked at each other as if we had discovered a diamond. That's how we came to be here. I guess it was destiny."

Coming to a community such as Bend,

And they did. For the first time in her life, Evers-Williams slowed down and enjoyed an extended second honey moon with her beloved Walter. As she did so, she watched her new community grow and change over a decade and a new influx of people arrive. Some of what she saw, and still sees, concerns her.

"I was always impressed initially by the drivers in this area - of how gracious they were. They allowed people in. They waited. They slowed down. Within 10 years I have seen quite a contrast... There is a rudeness that you can find now amongst drivers that we didn't know a few years ago. There is the sprawl. The friendliness is still a part of Bend's personality but it's changing. And that's what I find so disappointing. If you are coming to an area that is as clean, as pristine, as warm - emotionally, one to another - as [Bend], usually that is what you move to a place for. So I have little patience for those who come here with a negative attitude about them - or at least I should say - one where they don't truly appreciate what we have here."

Evers-Williams, formerly the Commissioner of Public Works in Los Angeles, also expressed concerns about long-range planning in Bend. "Having lived in Los Angeles for many numbers of years, I saw and lived first hand the problems of not planning well. Not planning ahead. We have a problem with transportation. Will our streets, will our highway, will our roads take care of the increased traffic that we have? What are we doing to address that problem? Not just on a temporary basis, but long range. What are we doing about transportation? What's on the agenda to talk about buses or - even as this place grows - some kind of transit?"

"What are we doing about the wonderful water resources? Will we find ourselves with so many golf courses until we find ourselves with a shortage of water for other uses? *What do we want?* I think that's the question. What do those in Central Oregon - what is it that you want? You can pick up newspapers, you can sit in groups and hear discussions, and that's really the topic of interest now. Where are we going? What are we going to do? What role can we play as individuals or small community groups? For Bend to lose that sense of community would be the greatest tragedy of all with

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Mississippi played - negative and positive - in moving this country forward in the area of civil rights, there is no civil rights museum there. So we're looking at combining the two," explained Evers-Williams. "... basically, it was Mississippi that suffered the most, gave the most and got things going."

Evers-Williams is not daunted by new technology, but embraces it as a tool of the new century in her ongoing work for civil and human rights.

"It is no more of the old," she says.

"Everything is through computers and high tech. The future is here. For me, personally, I must focus on being as astute as I possible can in these areas. Because if not, I will be left behind. And I'm a very strong believer [that] ... one does not need to be an expert in everything. But you must be wise enough to surround yourself with people who are experts in these different arenas if you want to pull something together. I want to be the force to pull in these experts from around the country and say alright, this is what I want to do."

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where it is not very diverse ethnically did raise some questions for Evers-Williams. "I said, 'Walter I'm not sure I want to break down the barriers again.' Again referred to my move from Mississippi to Claremont, California. We were the second family of color to move to that town. My children and I were treated well, but I just didn't want to go through any hassle, any more... We simply wanted to move here, and have a life here, of peace and quiet and contentment."

"What are we doing about the wonderful water resources? Will we find ourselves with so many golf courses until we find ourselves with a shortage of water for other uses? What do we want? I think that's the question. What do those in Central Oregon - what is it that we want? You can pick up newspapers, you can sit in groups and hear discussions, and that's really the topic of interest now. Where are we going? What are we going to do? What role can we play as individuals or small community groups? For Bend to lose that sense of community would be the greatest tragedy of all with growth."

"I am absolutely delighted when I see people or see references to people attending the town and City Council meetings and being actively involved. Because, regardless of where you live, if you don't realize that you as individuals and small groups have the power in your hands - in the vote - to make the city what you want it to be, you are walking away from what could be your legacy. And what's left for generations to come. I have not been to

Continued on pg. 10

for something extraordinary!...

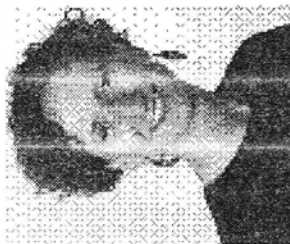
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Myrtle Evers-Williams and Medgar Evers

reduced level."

"In a sense I'm really beginning to put roots down, or let them go deeper in the community. And I think I have something that I can offer this community."

### THE WOMAN BEHIND THE IMAGE

With the 1999 publication of her book, *Watch Me Fly, What I Learned on the Way to Becoming the Woman I was Meant to Be*, the veil has fallen from this woman of power, and the person behind her own history comes into focus.

"My birthdate is the 17th of March," explains Evers-Williams, "which means that I am, astrologically, a Piscean. Two fish moving in opposite directions and yet joined together... I am many things. There are many components to me: the strong Myrtle, the determined one, the soft Myrtle, the Myrtle that confuses many members of the public... who think that I'm nice all the time. I can be just as tough and hard as the next person."

"I had a very difficult time writing *Watch Me Fly*, because there was a part of me that is personal - that I hold to my chest. And the question kept coming up, how much of yourself do you show? How much of your vulnerability do you allow people to see? Should you not be in this book everything that the public thinks you are - tough and strong...? I kept coming back: but that's only a part of me. There's a soft side that hurts - the side when I'm unsure of myself in fleeting times. That I'm very human. That Medgar was very human. That we loved each other dearly but our marriage was like most marriages: good, solid, but not without struggle. Not without strife."

"I can show that I was able to love again. That I had a wonderful marriage with another man that was completely different than what Medgar and I had. Because I was different and it was a different time. To show some of the little missteps made in my career activities, or the

little things that I could have changed or would have changed if I knew when I was rearing my children. I showed the human side of myself. Because they are lessons in living. And that means exposing yourself. That was what I ended up doing."

"When I completed a month and a half book tour, I knew I'd done the right thing. Because people came up to me, mostly women - but also men - young women, and I wanted to reach that audience, who said, 'Thank you for being open. Thank you for being honest. Because it's helped me so much. And I knew then that it was the right thing to have done.'"

I conferred with my friend Coretta Scott King, and I said, "Rett, I'm going to talk about this." She said, "Oh, you can't!" I said, "Yes I can. You may not be able to, but I can." Because she is on such a pedestal until... the human side is kind of difficult - and I know she is as human as the next person.

I will have to say to you that that book was my statement of liberation. Of me. I am not only, "the widow of." I've done so many other things. Doors have been opened for me, but I firmly believe that if you are not qualified to walk through that door and produce whatever is expected of you, it doesn't make any difference how many doors are opened for you. Because you can't hold your own.

"I will be 67 March 17, 2000. I have no problem with my age. I am very thankful and very blessed to be where I am. My eldest son Darrell said to me, 'Mom, you have lived three life times.' I don't know how he chose three, but I know I have had, I have lived, many lives. And I am very thankful, and very grateful."

A strong voice, a quiet grace, a loving woman and a formidable opponent, Myrtle Evers-Williams stretches her roots into the grounds of Central Oregon and continues to write on the skies.

ing time for me because Walter was my best friend, my partner, my husband. He just played so many roles, was so important in my life."

"When I decided that I would no longer serve as Chairman of the NAACP - that I had indeed accomplished everything that I set out to accomplish - I shocked many, many people. Many people said I gave up the power. I don't see it that way. I made a decision that I no longer wanted to be on the road all of the time. I would shed tears in a hotel room because I wasn't here. I wasn't here with my neighbors who had embraced me. That I could not do what I had done before being on the road. I did not have a church home. And talking to neighbors and of being involved in some way in the community. That had kind of escaped me. I said, that's what I want at this point in my life. And it's not that I'm going to hide out and never be involved in anything on a national level. I still plan on doing that. But at a much

any of the City Council meetings, but with my schedule changing as it is, I just may well do that."

With the death of her second husband in 1995, and a newly elected Chairman of the then-troubled NAACP, Evers-Williams again began to travel, resuming a busy schedule of speaking engagements and meetings across the country.

"I feel a part of this community, but I have a longing to be a real part of the community, rather than just having an address here... Immediately after Walter's death, I started to travel. And I have traveled constantly up until this summer. It's the first opportunity I've had to really be here. In Bend. At home. Now, as I look at this new century I have had to ask myself, what is it that you want to do with the rest of your life? - Realizing that I probably have less years than I have had. That doesn't bother me in the least bit. But it has been a try-