

# Medgar Evers: July 2, 1925-June 12, 1963

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Born in Decatur, Mississippi, Medgar Evers attended school there until he was inducted into the army. Evers fought for the United States in WWII, however, he found that upon his return to his country, authorities discriminated against Evers and five friends because of their skin color, pushing them away at gunpoint from a local election. Despite this, Evers went on to pursue a degree in business administration from Alcorn State University. He was active in athletics and extracurricular activities, contributing to the football and track teams, the debate team and serving as president of the junior class.

He married classmate Myrlie Beasley on December 24, 1951, and completed his degree the following year. The couple moved to Mound Bayou, Mississippi, where T.R.M. Howard hired Evers to sell insurance for his Magnolia Mutual Life Insurance Company. Howard was also the president of the Regional Council of Negro Leadership (RCNL), a civil rights and self help organization. Evers' involvement with RCNL gave him crucial training in activism. He helped organize RCNL's boycott of service stations that denied blacks use of their restrooms. The boycotters distributed bumper stickers with the slogan "Don't buy gas where you can't use the restroom." Evers applied to the then-segregated University of Mississippi Law School in February 1954. When his application was rejected, Evers became the focus of a NAACP campaign to desegregate the school, a case aided by the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education* that segregation was unconstitutional. In December 1954, Evers became the NAACP's first field officer in Mississippi.

After moving to Jackson, Mississippi, Evers was involved in a boycott campaign against White merchants and was instrumental in eventually desegregating the University of Mississippi when that institution was forced to enroll James Meredith in 1962.

In the weeks leading up to his death, Evers found himself the target of several threats. His public investigations into the murder of Emmett Till and his vocal support of Clyde Kennard left him vulnerable to attack. On May 28, 1963, a molotov cocktail was thrown into the carport of his home, and several days later, he was nearly run down by a car after he emerged from the Jackson NAACP office.

Civil rights demonstrations accelerated in Jackson during the first week of June 1963.



Medgar Evers

A local television station granted Evers time for a short speech, his first in Mississippi, where he outlined the goals of the Jackson civil rights movement. Following the speech, threats on Evers' life increased.

On June 11, 1963, Evers pulled into his driveway after returning from an integration meeting where he had conferred with NAACP lawyers. Emerging from his car and carrying NAACP t-shirts that read, "Jim Crow Must Go," Evers was struck in the back with a bullet that ricocheted into his home. He staggered 30 feet before collapsing, dying at a local hospital 50 minutes later. Evers was murdered just hours after President John F. Kennedy's speech on national television in support of civil rights.

Mourned nationally, Evers was buried on June 19 in Arlington National Cemetery and received full military honors in front of a crowd of more than 3,000 people. The past chairman of the American Veterans Committee, Mickey Levine, said at the services, "No soldier in this field has fought more courageously than Medgar Evers."

On June 23, Byron De La Beckwith, a member of the White Citizen's Council and Ku Klux Klan, was arrested for Evers' murder. During the course of his first 1964 trial, Beckwith was visited by former Mississippi governor Ross Barnett and one-time Army Major General Edwin A. Walker. All White juries deadlocked twice that year on Beckwith's guilt, allowing him to escape justice. In response to the murder and miscarriage of justice, musician Bob Dylan wrote the song "Only a Pawn in Their Game" about Evers and his assassin. More recently rapper Immortal Technique wrote about the blood of Malcolm X and Medgar Evers in the song "Crossing the Boundary." Evers' legacy has been kept alive in a variety of ways. In 1970, Medgar Evers College was established in Brooklyn, NY as part of the City University of New York.



The Medgar Evers home museum in Jackson, Mississippi.

In 1994, 30 years after the two previous trials had failed to reach a verdict, Beckwith was again brought to trial based on new evidence concerning statements he had made to others. Beckwith was convicted on February 5, 1994, after living as a free man for 3 decades after the murder. Beckwith appealed unsuccessfully, and died in prison in January 2001. The 1996 film *Ghosts of the Mississippi* tells the story of the 1994 trial. Evers' wife, Myrlie became a noted activist in her own right, eventually serving as chairwoman of the NAACP. Evers' brother Charles remained involved in Mississippi Civil Rights for years to come. In 2001, Myrlie and Medgar's oldest son died. Evers is survived by his wife Myrlie, a daughter and a son.