

# Children OF THE Movement

The sons and daughters of Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Elijah Muhammad, George Wallace, Andrew Young, Julian Bond, Stokely Carmichael, Bob Moses, James Chaney, Elaine Brown, and others reveal how the civil rights movement tested and transformed their families

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# 1

## Casualties of War

THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT now occupies a cozy place in America's collective memory.

Schoolchildren dutifully learn about Rosa Parks refusing to give up her bus seat. Civil rights battlegrounds in places like Selma, Alabama, have been turned into tourist stops. Every January, politicians and aging civil rights veterans solemnly gather in front of cameras to commemorate the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr.

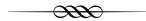
The platitudes about the movement have become so ingrained in our daily lives that it's easy to forget the desperation that inspired the civil rights struggle. It wasn't just a movement; it was a war. Activists were tortured in jail, beaten by mobs, ostracized by their families. People were murdered.

Some never recovered physically or psychologically from their experiences, says Taylor Branch, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Parting the Waters*. "They became casualties of war. It was a war in which they were spectacularly triumphant, but they were treated and ignored like it was a war that they lost."

Several of these casualties passed their wounds on. Their pain prevented them from becoming close to their children.

Reverend James Bevel, part of Martin Luther King's inner circle, is no longer on speaking terms with two of his daughters. Others simply kept their grief to themselves. James Forman Sr., former executive director of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), never seemed to know how to speak to his two sons about the trauma he experienced in Mississippi. The daughter of James Zwerg, a Freedom Rider, first learned about the magnitude of her father's suffering from a history textbook.

It was strange to talk to these movement veterans about their personal struggles with their children. When we discussed the politics of the movement, they would effortlessly and eloquently riff about nonviolence and social change. But when I started asking simple questions about their feelings for their children, some would suddenly stop and grasp for words. Their children, however, had plenty to say.



# Chevara Orrin and Bacardi Jackson

## Daughters of the Rev. James Bevel

CHEVARA SLAMMED ON HER BRAKES and swerved onto the shoulder of an Atlanta freeway when she heard the radio announcement. Reverend James Bevel, a civil rights activist, was speaking that night in an Atlanta church. She reversed directions and drove there. When she entered the crowded sanctuary, she sat in the front row and locked eyes with Bevel before he rose to speak.

Bevel was accustomed to being center stage. He was a leader in the student sit-in movement during the early 1960s and part of Martin Luther King Jr.'s inner circle. He was one of King's best tacticians, the man whose organizing ability helped give the movement many of its most inspiring victories.

That evening Bevel began preaching a sermon on the Old Testament hero Noah. But suddenly he went off onto another subject—the evils of white people. He compared white people to maggots and declared that white women were only good for use as sex pets or slaves—all the while looking at Chevara in the front row.

Chevara bolted from her chair in the middle of the sermon and fled to a bathroom where she sobbed. There was a lifetime of hurt behind her tears. Bevel is her father, the one-time companion of her white Jewish mother.

Chevara, a caramel-colored thirty-six-year-old woman with high cheekbones, bears a striking resemblance to Bevel. Years after the incident at that Atlanta church, her voice still rises in anger when she recalls the moment. “He was negating my very existence,” she says. “I wanted to stand up and shout to him, ‘How dare you? Here I am your own daughter, the result of a relationship between you and a white woman.’ I was just devastated.”

Bevel is a legend among students of the civil rights movement. But he's no hero to Chevara or to her sister, Bacardi. Both say their father never provided for them while they endured a childhood marked by homelessness, welfare, and hand-me-down clothes. He was too preoccupied with his place in the movement to notice them. "He doesn't know my favorite food," Chevara says. "He doesn't know where I went to high school. He doesn't know what my college degree is in. He doesn't even know when I was born."

I meet the sisters in the suburban Atlanta home they share. As I talk to them about their father, their moods alternate between anger and laughter as they recount the exchanges they've had with him. "He's great in many ways and he's done some great things," thirty-three-year-old Bacardi says. "But he's always failed miserably as a father."

Bevel, sixty-seven, now lives in Chicago. He doesn't apologize for his absence. He says the movement was all-consuming. Sacrifices had to be made. His daughters could have seen him more if they had decided to become activists like him. "They don't understand my vocation. My vocation is to deal with the salvation, education, and liberation of American people. That's all I worked on. Apart from this, I don't exist. In order to be with me, you have to work on this."

Bevel's dedication as a parent may be questioned, but not his place in civil rights history. He is best known today for his role in the 1963 campaign to desegregate Birmingham, which was then considered the South's most segregated city. The campaign had stalled because Martin Luther King Jr. had run out of demonstrators willing to fill the jails. Bevel proposed a daring move: use children as demonstrators. He persuaded King to accept his strategy, over great opposition from King's advisors.

The audacious move, which some dubbed "the Children's Miracle," became a movement turning point. The images of Birmingham's public safety commissioner, Eugene "Bull" Connor, turning fire hoses and attack dogs against child demonstrators gained international sympathy for the movement. Birmingham's white business leaders agreed to desegregate the city.