

Coretta Scott King, civil rights activist in her own right, dies

Erin Haines
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ATLANTA — Coretta Scott King, who worked to keep her husband's dream alive with a chin-held-high grace and serenity that made her a powerful symbol of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s creed of brotherhood and nonviolence, died Tuesday. She was 78.

The "first lady of the civil rights movement" died in her sleep during the night at an alternative medicine clinic in Mexico, her family said. Arrangements were being made to fly the body back to Atlanta.

She had been recovering from a serious stroke and heart attack suffered last August. Just two weeks ago, she made her first public appearance in a year on the eve of her late husband's birthday.

Doctors at the clinic said King was battling advanced ovarian cancer when she arrived there on Thursday. The doctors said the cause of death was respiratory failure.

News of her death led to tributes to King across Atlanta, including a moment of silence in the Georgia Capitol and piles of flowers placed at the tomb of her slain husband. Flags at the King Center — the institute devoted to the civil rights leader's legacy — were lowered to half-staff.

"She wore her grief with

grace. She exerted her leadership with dignity," the Rev. Joseph Lowery, who helped found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference with King's husband in 1957.

Former Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young, one of Martin Luther King's top aides, said Coretta Scott King's fortitude rivaled that of her husband. "She was strong if not stronger than he was," Young said.

Coretta Scott King was a supportive lieutenant to her husband during the most dangerous and tumultuous days of the civil rights movement, and after his assassination in Memphis, Tenn., on April 4, 1968, she carried on his work while also raising their four children.

"I'm more determined than ever that my husband's dream will become a reality," the young widow said soon after his slaying.

She pushed and goaded politicians for more than a decade to have her husband's birthday observed as a national holiday, achieving success in 1986. In 1969 she founded the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta and used it to confront hunger, unemployment, voting rights and racism.

"The center enables us to go out and struggle against the evils in our society," she often said.



File Photo / The Associated Press

Dexter Scott King, youngest son of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., gets a hug from his mother, Coretta Scott King, at a news conference, in this Jan. 14, 1989 file photo. On that day in Atlanta, it was announced that he would replace her as president of the King Center later that year. King, who turned a life shattered by her husband's assassination into one devoted to enshrining his legacy of human rights and equality, died Tuesday, morning.

She also accused movie and TV companies, video arcades, gun manufacturers and toy makers of promoting violence.

King became a symbol in her own right of her husband's struggle for peace and brotherhood, presiding with an almost regal bearing over seminars and conferences.

The Rev. Jesse Jackson, who was with her husband when he was assassinated, said Tuesday that she understood that every time her husband left home, there

was the chance he might not come back. Jackson pronounced her a "freedom fighter."

"Like all great champions she learned to function with pain and keep serving," he said, adding: "She kept marching. She did not flinch."

In Washington, President Bush hailed her as "a remarkable and courageous woman and a great civil rights leader."

After her stroke, King missed the annual King celebration in Atlanta two

weeks ago but appeared with her children at an awards dinner a few days earlier, smiling from her wheelchair but not speaking. The crowd gave her a standing ovation.

Despite her repeated calls for unity among civil rights groups, her own children have been divided over whether to sell the King Center to the National Park Service and let the family focus less on grounds maintenance and more on King's message. Two of the four children were strongly against such a move.

Gov. Sonny Perdue ordered flags at all state buildings to be flown at half-staff and offered to allow King's body to lie in repose at the Georgia Capitol. There was no immediate response to the offer, the governor's office said.

King died at Santa Monica Health Institute in Rosarito Beach, Mexico, south of San Diego, said her sister, Edythe Scott Bagley of Cheyney, Pa. She had gone to California to rest and be with family, according to Young.

Coretta Scott was studying voice at the New England Conservatory of Music and planning on a singing career when a friend introduced her to King, a young Baptist minister studying at Boston University.

"She said she wanted me to meet a very promising young minister from Atlanta," King once said, adding with a

laugh: "I wasn't interested in meeting a young minister at that time."

She recalled that on their first date he told her: "You know, you have everything I ever wanted in a woman. We ought to get married someday." Eighteen months later, in 1953, they did.

The couple moved to Montgomery, Ala., where he became pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church and helped lead the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott that Rosa Parks set in motion when she refused to give up her seat on a segregated bus. With that campaign, King began enacting his philosophy of nonviolent, direct social action.

Over the years, King was with her husband in his finest hours. She was at his side as he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. She marched beside him from Selma, Ala., into Montgomery in 1965 on the triumphant drive for a voting rights law.

Only days after his death, she flew to Memphis with three of her children to lead thousands marching in honor of her slain husband and to plead for his cause.

"I think you rise to the occasion in a crisis," she once said. "I think the Lord gives you strength when you need it. God was using us — and now he's using me, too."

Her husband's womanizing had been an open secret during the height of the civil rights movement.

Cultural Awareness Commission Brings you:

Cultural Trivia:

Who was the prime minister of Belgium in 1999?

Paid for by Student Activity Fee

Answer: Guy Verhofstadt

Home is where the POINTE is!

- 24 Hour Computer Center
- 24 Hour Fitness Center
- State of the Art Theater Room
- Resort Style Pool and Hot Tub
- Individual Leases
- Washer/Dryer in Every Apartment
- Private Bedrooms
- Ethernet in Every Bedroom
- 24 Hour Emergency Maintenance
- Cable with HBO

POINTEWEST
215 Spencer Place, Cayce, S.C. 803-739-0899
www.myownapartment.com

ALLEN & O'HARA
COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE, INC.