

Coretta Scott King, bearer of a legacy: Leaders mourn King's passing

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [February 21, 2006](#) issue

Coretta Scott King, who died January 31, lived faithfully through marriage to one of the nation's most famous, danger-risking pastors and became an admired civil rights leader in her own right over the past 38 years.

Leaders with connections to the King family and the civil rights movement recalled how the 78-year-old widow of Martin Luther King Jr. blended a commitment to her marriage with a determination to achieve justice for others. Bishop Eddie Long, pastor of New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Atlanta, said he asked her how she handled having a husband who was away so often, working on movement causes. "She said, 'Let me tell you something, I did not just marry a man. I married a destiny,'" he recalled.

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, director of the African-American studies program at Colby College in Maine, said the significance of the Kings' partnership will continue to be a subject of research and education. "She went into that marriage with the gift of her own progressive education and her own skills and talents, and she used them marvelously for our freedom," said Gilkes.

The wife of the civil rights leader assassinated in 1968 had her own experiences with racism that led her to strive for justice along with her husband. Since Coretta Scott King grew up in rural Alabama, she "probably saw more rigid, vile prejudice and discrimination than did King because King grew up in the city," said Woodie W. White, a retired United Methodist bishop who lives in Atlanta, the hometown of Martin Luther King Jr.

White, who attended meetings with Martin Luther King Jr. to plan a civil rights march in Detroit months before the 1963 March on Washington, writes an annual "Dear Martin" column updating the status of race relations.

“One of the things that I observed over the years after Dr. King’s death was that the causes for which King had become renowned were actually her causes as well,” White said. “She didn’t just carry on his legacy. She carried on the fight against injustice because that was who she was as a person.”

Often photographed on the arm of her husband at the front of civil rights marches, Coretta Scott King sacrificed a career as a classical vocalist as well as the privacy of her family for the public role to which she ascended with her husband.

After Martin Luther King’s death, she spearheaded efforts to honor his memory with a national holiday and establish the King Center in Atlanta to encourage social change without violence.