



**Testimony of Myrlie B. Evers, Founder of the Medgar Evers Institute and Chairman
Emeritus of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People,
Before the Subcommittees on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security
and on the
Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties
Committee on the Judiciary
U.S. House of Representatives
June 12, 2007**

Thank you, Honorable Chairmen and Members of the Subcommittees, for the opportunity to testify in support of the Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Act (HR 923).

My name is Myrlie Evers-Williams. I am President of MEW Associates, Inc., Founder of the Medgar Evers Institute, Chairman of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and most widely known as the widow of civil rights leader, Medgar Wiley Evers.

Medgar Evers was the first NAACP Field Secretary in the State of Mississippi - his native home. He was the major, unofficial investigator in the murder of Emmett Till. He disguised himself as a sharecropper. He frequently changed the cars and trucks that he drove to gather information that was sent beyond Mississippi's "cotton curtain" to media sources elsewhere. He met with and assisted relatives of Emmett Till, including Mrs. Mamie Till-Mobley. Medgar's involvement in this case was reported in depth, particularly in the Johnson publications of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines.

How appropriate for me to be here today remembering Emmett Till and the many others, known and unknown, who were permanently disposed of through hate, fear, and racism. Medgar Evers' assassination was the first, the first of the modern civil rights era to receive international coverage. Our family received telegrams, letters, and cards from around the world expressing horror, disgust, shame and just plain condolences, also a small number of hate letters that expressed joy in his assassination. These letters and Medgar's personal papers now reside at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History in Jackson, Mississippi.

Today is June 12, 2007. It marks the 44th Anniversary of Medgar's assassination (June 12, 1963).

On the night of June 11, 1963, President John F. Kennedy addressed the nation on Civil Rights issues. Shortly after midnight, June 12, 1963, Medgar was shot in the back with a high-powered rifle as he got out of his car, returning home from a long exhaustive day of demanding activity. He had been the voice for justice and equality in Mississippi. Many of those years, he was alone with little support, mostly because of fear of retaliation that paralyzed others from active and open participation in societal change. That was a time when there was little media coverage, when civil rights was not the "in" thing to be involved in.

Medgar was the spokesperson, the care giver for the downtrodden in Mississippi. His bravery put him as number 1 on the Klan's hit list. Death was his daily companion, and we knew it. Medgar's awareness did not begin with his NAACP position. He served in the army during World War II in Normandy. He returned home, was honorably discharged and enrolled at Alcorn High School and Alcorn A&M College. He graduated with a Degree in Business Administration.

While employed by Magnolia Mutual Life Insurance Co., he applied for admission to the University of Mississippi Law School, becoming the first African-American to do so, long before he assisted James Meredith in entering Ole Miss.

Believing that a solid education was important for all citizens, he filed a suit in the name of our first son - Darrell Kenyatta Evers vs. the State of Mississippi. The result: The legal battle was won, and the schools were desegregated, providing the promise of an equal education for all.

The successful voter registration drives, the economic boycotts, removal of barriers to parks, libraries, entertainment centers, transportation, hiring of police officers, equalization of teachers' salaries and many other gains came as a result of Medgar's dedication to equal opportunity.

This was a man who wanted no glory for himself but who knew that his country could be a better place for all its citizens.

There are numerous other accounts of his determination and the growing number of activists who joined in pursuit of the American Dream in spite of the price to be paid. However, shortly after Medgar's assassination, change, though small, became evident. School crossing guards were hired. A few policemen were hired with restrictions to only enforce the law within their neighborhoods. Libraries and recreational facilities were open to all.

Perhaps public attitudes spoke louder than ever. After the first memorial service in Jackson, Mississippi, thousands marched on the Masonic Temple on Lynch Street to downtown Farris Street, chanting "After Medgar, no more fear." (Details and photos in *Life*, June 1963). Fear, one of the strongest hold-backs on freedom, was at last being erased.

As we look to the passage of Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Act (HR923), let us not forget that family members of the persons murdered are also victims. They are human beings who must survive the loss of their loved ones - and all that that entailed...the emotional Hell that never completely disappears; the nightmare of the bloody crime scene; the sounds of terror; the firebombs; the sound of gunfire; missing that person's love, care and guidance; the loss of financial support and so much more.

Yet there are those who say that civil rights "cold cases" should remain lost in our history - "no one benefits - the men are old and will soon die, so why bother? Besides it costs the public too much to finance such projects." But, murder is murder. They were young murderers who grew old. Life was something denied those whose lives were so brutally taken.

I set forth on a mission to see that justice would prevail in Medgar's case, based on a promise I made to him shortly before his death.

The first trial was another first. No White had been tried for the murder of a Black in Mississippi. The first and second trials both ended with a hung jury. The messages sent to the public were that 'old Southern justice' remained intact. I was on the witness stand testifying when Governor Ross Barnett entered the courtroom, paused, looked at me and proceeded to walk to the defendant, shook his hand, gave a 'good ole boy' slap on his back and sat with him throughout my testimony. The message had been sent to the jury: "do not convict this man."

After the first trial, the accused assassin was given a parade with support banners along the highway from Jackson to his home in the Delta. During the next election, the District Attorney ran for Governor and the assassin ran for Lt. Governor. What a ticket!

Years passed. I returned to Mississippi on a regular basis, always questioning people in various parts of the territory on any information that may have heard discussed relevant to the Evers case. Most people claimed that I was insane. "Keep trying, never give up" became my motto.

Then entered Jerry Mitchell, a reporter with the *Clarion Ledger* newspaper. He provided me with hope that some new information had been uncovered.

One miracle after another took place. Missing witnesses were found and were willing to testify; numerous boxes of evidence found; murder weapon found; my personal State-stamped transcript of the first trial was hand-delivered to the District Attorney; FBI cooperation; and a few politicians voiced their support that the time had come to right the wrongs of our society.

The conviction of the murderer came on February 5, 1994, almost 30 years to the day of the first trial. Reporters from around the world were there to broadcast the guilty verdict. Our American Justice System became stronger.

The Medgar Evers case and third trial became a roadmap for all of the others that have followed. The legal issues: speedy trial, court approval to have a previous transcript read in court, and other legal matters were settled in this case.

Since Medgar's case, 29 cases have been reexamined with 29 different arrests and 22 convictions, with one trial still ongoing in Mississippi.

One noted civil rights leader said at the Arlington Cemetery service: "Medgar believed in his country, now it remains to be seen if his country believes in him."

The passage of a bill named in honor of Emmett Till would send the message that the country indeed does believe in Medgar and in the cause of justice. It is a message that is particularly important to send to the young people of today and to generations to come.