*"One hundred fifty years after the Emancipation Proclamation and 50 years after the March on Washington, we celebrate the spirit of our ancestors, which has allowed us to move from a nation of unborn hopes and a history of disenfranchised votes to today's expression of a more perfect union . . . Where our paths seem blanketed by throngs of oppression and riddled by pangs of despair, we ask for your guidance toward the light of deliverance, and that the visions of those that came before us and dreamed of this day, that we recognize that their visions still inspire us."*
--Myrlie Evers-Williams, 2013 Presidential Inaugural Invocation

When Myrlie Evers-Williams gave the invocation at President Obama's January inauguration, she was in part recognizing the vision and courage of her late great husband, Mississippi civil rights leader Medgar Evers, assassinated by a gun 50 years ago. Medgar was a huge inspiration for me. As a 22 year old first year law student at Yale, I traveled to Mississippi during my first spring break in 1961 to reconnect with my friends from SNCC—the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. After the sit-in movement and SNCC's founding at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, where Dr. King and Ella Baker pulled those of us who had sat down at lunch counters together from across the South, I decided on the spur of the moment to apply to law school after volunteering for the Atlanta National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and seeing how many poor Black people could not get or afford legal counsel. Few, if any, White lawyers took civil rights cases at that time.

I had been thinking about going to graduate school to study 19th Century Russian Literature and entering the Foreign Service but was jolted by such great need and injustice all around me at home. So remembering my daddy's reminder that God ran a full employment economy and if you followed the need you'd never lack for a worthwhile purpose in life, I applied to law school—with no understanding of what it entailed. Many of my SNCC friends had gone into the poorest and most dangerous states of the South to organize poor Black citizens to vote and demand a better life. I needed to reconnect with my courageous friends that spring to be reminded of why I was in law school studying corporations and property law. So off I went to Mississippi.

Medgar Evers, the local head of the NAACP, was the first welcoming face I saw when I arrived. He picked me up at the Jackson, Mississippi airport, took me home to meet and have dinner with Myrlie and their children, and then drove me up to the Mississippi Delta where the SNCC headquarters in Greenwood was located, about 90 miles away. Our first news upon arrival was about a shooting which had terrorized the Black community that day.

The next morning I joined Bob Moses and James Forman and other local SNCC workers and a scraggly group of poor Black citizens who fearfully but courageously decided to go to the courthouse to try to register to vote and to show that gun violence was not going to deter them. We were met by a hostile White mob and burly White police officers with German Shepherds in tow—the first time police dogs were brought out to attack civil rights workers in the 60s. I was at the end of the line—having promised my mother and my Mississippi born Yale Law professor that I would not be arrested. I marvel to this day at Bob Moses' courage in not moving when a police dog lunged at his thigh and ripped his pants. The crowd of Black would-be registrants scattered and all the SNCC leaders were arrested, throwing me car keys as they were taken off

to jail right down the street, followed by the menacing mob and police with dogs, to be tried immediately. I had the phone number of John Doar, the Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights in the Justice Department, in my jeans and I called him in a panic from a telephone booth—trying to describe the lawless scene and realizing that all three of the Black lawyers in the state who would take civil rights cases were 90 miles away in Jackson. In a steely calm voice, he admonished me to just state the facts and to control my emotions. I knew then in every pore of my being how it felt to be a poor, helpless, isolated, terrified Black person in that lawless state. I ran from the phone booth to the courthouse and tried to go up the steps to help my SNCC friends but was blocked from entering the front door. I went around to a side alley to try to get into the back door and was again blocked by police. But I knew in those few horrible minutes that I would survive law school and come back to Mississippi to practice law and seek justice for the voiceless and voteless. I had found my calling.

Medgar was a Mississippi native, a graduate of Alcorn State University, and a World War II veteran who had fought for his country at the battle of Normandy but was turned away at gunpoint when he tried to vote back home. After he was turned down for admission at the segregated University of Mississippi's law school, he helped lay the groundwork for James Meredith to become the first African American admitted to that university. As the NAACP's first field secretary in Mississippi, he was instrumental in coordinating civil rights activity in the state. He led by example, undeterred in the face of open White hostility.

In the early morning hours of June 12, 1963, he was shot and killed in his driveway after returning home from an NAACP meeting. Byron de la Beckwith was finally convicted of the murder thirty-one years later thanks to Myrlie's dogged persistence.

I returned to live in Mississippi in 1964, a year after Medgar Evers's death, as a staff attorney with the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund, helping to continue the work Medgar and others had begun and to provide legal help for the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project workers organized by SNCC and the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), a coalition of civil rights groups, who had traveled to that closed society to shed light on it and support local Black citizens who were seeking to exercise their right to vote.

Throughout the years, I never forgot Medgar's personal kindness and support of a young first year law student and public example of courage and determination in the face of enormous danger and fear.

So I warmly welcomed the opportunity to join Myrlie Evers-Williams at the 2013 Heritage Convocation at their alma mater Alcorn State University this week. How very different Mississippi and the nation might look to Medgar today. There is so much he would be proud of, but still so much left to do.

He would of course be thrilled to see the country has elected its first African American president and to know Mississippi now leads the nation in the number of Black elected officials even if their influence is under assault and waning. But he would be disappointed to know that in Mississippi and elsewhere some people are resorting to Jim Crow-era tactics to disenfranchise voters in a desperate attempt to reverse 50 years of hard earned political progress. The sight of

older Black voters standing in long lines at the polls last November anxious about being rejected and turned away would likely bring sad flashbacks of the young veteran chased from the polls at gunpoint.

He would be pleased to know that all public schools are technically available to all children and that many school systems are even led by Black administrators. But he would be dismayed to learn that even so, many Black children are still getting a separate, unequal, and failing education. He might smile at the number of Black doctors, lawyers, and millionaires in Mississippi now, but would be disappointed to know the state also has the highest child poverty, low birth weight, and infant mortality rates. He would also be so sad to see the number of young, middle-aged, and older Black men in Mississippi's prisons, many of the former for pot possession and use, trapped in a prison pipeline leading to social and economic death.

He would be relieved to know Black Mississippians no longer live in constant fear of the Ku Klux Klan and the kind of White supremacist terrorism that took his life. But he would be alarmed by the proliferation of gun violence that still keeps residents of many Black communities locked in their homes after dark in a new kind of American terror. And he would be dismayed by the resurgence of hate crimes like the cruel hit-and-run death of James Craig Anderson, a Black man assaulted and then run over in 2011 by a group of young White men who made a habit of coming to Jackson to assault and harass Black people for sport. But he would be proud that they, unlike his own killer, were brought to justice swiftly by the county district attorney, the son of Black civil rights pioneers.

In some ways the battles of the Civil Rights Movement were easier to fight 50 years ago because they were easier to see. Today the rigid lines that create two systems of opportunity for children in Mississippi and elsewhere are no longer written into law but remain present and the children know it. One group of children is still tracked towards limited opportunity, second class citizenship, and the invisible but powerful cradle to school to prison pipeline.

Despite having more elected officials and professionals now, there are fewer of the adult leaders on the ground who were once present in every community and totally focused on mentoring and preparing the next generation, teaching strong values, setting high standards, and making sure the future was better for Black children. Many crucial socializing institutions—family, church, neighborhood, community—have frayed. There are strong leaders still in Mississippi and elsewhere who are struggling to fight for equal education and justice for all children but they must multiply dramatically in numbers, strength, effectiveness, and voice in the face of unjust school policies and practices, like zero tolerance school discipline, and unjust law enforcement tactics. There is no excuse in 2013 for people of any color to fear joining the struggle for equality and justice and to be afraid to speak up for what's right and just and hold our political leaders accountable. Strong adult voices for children have to become a stronger and stronger force if the clock of racial and economic progress is not to continue to move backwards. The fabric of family and community must be rewoven and the child must be placed at the center of all of our concerns. Medgar Evers remains a beacon for all of us who are still inspired by his example and vision. We must not let all he lived and died for recede on our watch.

*Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to www.childrensdefense.org.*