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King forged a legacy in pushing her husband's
David J. Garrow Contributor to The Christian Science Monitor
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Coretta Scott King, who died Monday evening in Atlanta at age 78, was an iconic figure in black America and in US civil rights history. Although her stature derived primarily from the legacy of her husband, Mrs. King was an outspoken champion of human equality in her own regard.

In the early and mid-'60s, Mrs. King occasionally performed at musical benefits for civil rights and joined several important civil rights marches, but until the assassination of her husband, Martin Luther King Jr., in 1968, she worked largely as a mother at their modest home.

Dr. King's death transformed her life at the same time that it left her both emotionally and financially bereft. Demonstrating remarkable resilience in the immediate aftermath of his murder, she soon announced her desire to create a new institution, the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, to preserve his legacy and continue his work. That decision created tensions with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the civil rights group King had founded and led, which encountered financial decline and leadership turmoil after King's death.

The King Center experienced ups and downs, too, but by the early 1980s Mrs. King had succeeded in building an impressive complex, which included her husband's tomb, in the Atlanta neighborhood where he grew up as a child. The center hoped to sponsor programs that would popularize the principles of nonviolence, and to house a major civil rights archive and library. But administrative and financial hurdles undercut both initiatives.

Mrs. King had much better success in winning national adoption of an annual federal holiday marking her husband's Jan. 15 birthday. Undoubtedly, King himself would have wanted a less personal monument to the movement he came to symbolize. But his widow's intense commitment to memorializing his importance triumphed. Later, she forged her own way by becoming a forceful and insistent supporter of gay rights.

An Alabama native, Mrs. King was a student at Boston's prestigious New England Conservatory of Music in 1952 when she first met her future husband, who was then a PhD candidate at Boston University. She gave up her own musical career to become a minister's wife back in Alabama, where Dr. King in 1954 became the pastor of a prominent Montgomery church. Scarcely a year later, the arrest of Rosa Parks for refusing to give up her seat on a segregated city bus catapulted King to national prominence as president of the black community group that mounted a successful year-long bus boycott.

The Kings had been married less than three years when this whirlwind expansion of the southern black freedom struggle cast them into the public eye. Their first daughter, Yolanda, was born just prior to the boycott, and their first son, Martin III, followed in 1957. Mrs. King was eager to participate in civil rights efforts herself, but her

tradition-minded husband thought that a wife's primary duty was to stay home and raise their children. After the family's 1960 move to Atlanta, a second son, Dexter, was born in 1961, and a second daughter, Bernice, in 1963. In 2005 a major stroke largely silenced Mrs. King's voice, but her success in perpetuating her husband's legacy immortalizes her as well.

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