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Freedom came at cost of family

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Children of the Movement. By John Blake. Lawrence Hill Books. \$24.95. 260 pages.

The verdict: A highly original and insightful approach.

Countless books chronicle the African-American freedom struggle of the 1960s. In many volumes, the same famous activists appear again and again: the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Andrew Young, Bob Moses, Julian Bond, Stokely Carmichael. Yet rarely if ever do those histories include more than passing mention of the participants' families.

"Children of the Movement" by Atlanta Journal-Constitution reporter John Blake brings a new and poignant perspective to the freedom struggle's human legacy. Building upon several brief portraits of top activists' offspring he wrote for the AJC in September 2000, Blake profiles almost two dozen movement children. Many of their family names are well-known, but Blake's interviews paint a collective picture that is far less happy than stock images of movement anniversary gatherings.

Blake explains that his interest in top activists' offspring grew out of covering too many such commemorations.

"The events were supposed to be inspiring, but they seemed prerecorded . . . ," he writes. "No one seemed to be saying anything new."

A conversation with Atlanta publicist Chevara Orrin, one of at least 17 children fathered by James Bevel, who was one of King's most creative and charismatic aides during the '60s, set Blake on his fresh and fascinating venture.

Blake's first discussion with Orrin foreshadowed the conclusions he reports here.

"Many movement veterans have never been able to find another cause in the second half of life," he writes. "And many have not been able to build close relationships with their children."

Bevel's behavior toward his sons and daughters is the worst Blake encountered --- "their father never provided for them while they endured a childhood marked by homelessness, welfare and hand-me-down clothes" --- but "Children of the Movement" includes many sad stories.

Activists' offspring often found their fathers, and mothers, more interested in politics than in parenting. Another Bevel daughter, Bacardi Jackson, an Atlanta lawyer, told Blake that her

father, who lives in Chicago, "speaks in political theory all the time" and "always failed miserably as a father."

Bokar Ture, whose father was better known as Stokely Carmichael than as Kwame Ture, the name he adopted upon moving to West Africa, offered a similar recollection of his dad: "When he spoke, most of the time it had to do with revolution."

Not surprisingly, Blake summarizes his subjects' experiences by noting how "a large number of them are emotionally distant from their parents." But many, like Orrin and Jackson, have put together successful and fulfilling lives despite the shortcomings of their fathers.

Chaka Forman and James Forman Jr., whose father was executive secretary of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee during the movement's peak years, are similar examples. James Forman Sr., like Bevel, has endured many pitfalls --- "I mistake him for a homeless person," Blake writes of his initial glimpse of Forman --- but his two sons lead fulfilling lives, one as an actor, one as director of a Washington charter school.

But not all movement offspring have found rewarding work. One of Blake's chapters profiles Martin Luther King III, and Blake quotes Andrew Young as saying that King, now 46, "hasn't decided who he is yet or who he wants to be."

Martin King's own comments to Blake underscore Young's:

"Daddy used to say if a man hasn't found something worth dying for, he isn't fit to live. I'm not sure I got that." In some instances, children's values diverge greatly from those of their parents. Young's son, Bo, is one example.

"Bo wants to be a millionaire," his father told Blake. "Not only do I not understand it, I don't believe in it, and it's somewhat offensive to me."

As the King and Young chapters exemplify, Blake writes his profiles without fear or favor, and his honesty results in a book that is far more compelling and memorable than if it had been composed through rose-colored glasses.

Blake's success as an interviewer is not limited to Atlanta-based subjects. His chapter on Warith Dean Muhammad, one of the sons of Elijah Muhammad, head of the Nation of Islam in the '60s, features Muhammad confirming the widespread belief that "The Nation of Islam was the assassin of Malcolm X, that's for sure."

Blake's own verdict on the Nation --- by the late '60s, "the [Nation of Islam] had degenerated into a Muslim mafia" --- accentuates how the younger Muhammad has lived a far more commendable life than his father.

Three of Blake's subjects --- Peggy Wallace Kennedy, Ouida Barnett Atkins and Stephen Smitherman --- had fathers who were famous segregationist governors or mayors. The two women rue the paternal legacies of George Wallace and Ross Barnett, while Smitherman, whose

father was mayor of Selma, Ala., during the 1965 voting rights protests that made the city infamous, exemplifies the racial feuding that has plagued Selma since.

The final chapter, which focuses on present-day anti-globalization activists who "battle against corporate greed on an international scale," is fascinating but ultimately less successful.

Blake acknowledges that "some may question" his attempt to link these protestors to the activists of the '60s, but that effort does not seriously detract from what is otherwise a highly original, insightful and sometimes emotionally riveting book.

David J. Garrow is the author of "Bearing the Cross," a Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.