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Remembering Brenda

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This week President Obama unveiled a statue of civil rights heroine Rosa Parks on the grounds of the U.S. Capitol. We remember Rosa Parks. But do we remember Brenda Travis?

On Saturday, August 26, 1961, African-American Mississippians Hollis Watkins and Curtis (Elmer) Hayes sat down at a "Whites Only" lunch counter in my hometown of McComb, Miss., becoming the first persons in the state to take direct action against segregation in a "sit-in." For their revolutionary bravery they were promptly arrested and jailed for 30 days, charged with breach of peace.

Four days later on Wednesday, August 30, 1961, Robert Talbert, Isaac (Ike) Lewis, and 15-year-old Brenda Travis "sat-in" at the segregated Greyhound bus station in McComb. They, too, were arrested immediately and incarcerated 28 days in the county jail.

When Ike and Brenda were expelled from school, and refused readmission they were, in effect, handed lifetime sentences of raw poverty. Soon other African-American students would also be permanently expelled. Southern Blacks with high school educations could hardly expect, as a rule, to earn a fair, living wage. But to be denied the opportunity to attain even a high school diploma represented cruel and unusual punishment.

On October 4, 1961, approximately 120 of Brenda's and Ike's protesting classmates, led by young Brenda, marched through town, to the steps of City Hall singing, "We Shall Overcome." One-by-one the students ascended the steps of City Hall to kneel and pray. There they were beaten and kicked by cops and other fine citizens, then arrested.

Years later Brenda related, "I believe I was predestined to become an activist. I joined the NAACP and became involved in the movement to get people to vote. But they were afraid."

Jailed again, this time for her role in the McComb march, Brenda and the other students sang and prayed through the night. After several days, "They took me out of jail," Brenda related. "Said, 'We're taking you to Jackson to see your attorney.' After a long drive they pulled the car up to the gates of the Reform School in Oakley. My family, nobody knew where I was. My mother was never allowed to visit me the whole time. My family suffered."

Though sentenced to a year in Reformatory School, the young teenager was released before completing her full term under one condition, warned the Governor: "You must leave the state within 24 hours of your release!"

After 45 years in exile, Brenda returned to Mississippi, June 21, 2006, for the 45th anniversary of her 1961 direct action against segregation in Mississippi. Determined, I got in my automobile, pulled out of my driveway, and drove 10 hours from my home in Texas to meet her in McComb. I had something to give her; I had something to say to her.

Following two days of recognitions, speeches, awards ceremonies, a moving graduation exercise nearly a half-century too late for the expelled seniors of Burgland High, class of '62, and a final stirring address by Brenda Travis the right moment arrived for me to approach Brenda. My heart raced.

"Brenda," I began, "I'm Randall O'Brien. I grew up in McComb." "I'm very glad to meet you." "No, the honor is all mine. You are a hero of mine. I was 12 years old when you sat-in at the bus station and marched on City Hall. You were 15. Those remain, for me, two of the greatest acts of bravery in my lifetime."

"How very kind of you. Thank you, Randall." "Brenda, what happened to you was one of the darkest travesties of justice in American history. I am ashamed; I am embarrassed; I am angry. I am also changed by you, by your life, your courage, your cries for justice. As you know," I continued, "our lives travel down paths of continuation or compensation, one or the other, in the area of racial injustice. Your witness, and the courageous work of your sisters and brothers, has been a huge influence upon my life. I've tried to live my life to help compensate for all the wrong done to African-Americans. How can I say, 'thank you,' Brenda, for who you are and for who you've helped me to become?"

Brenda tried to speak, but couldn't. Her eyes filled with tears. We embraced. Slipping my right hand into my pants pocket, I clutched the surprise I had for her, pulled the gift out, and placed it in Brenda's hand.

Pulling back, looking into her eyes while still holding her hand, I whispered, "A few years after your civil rights battles for our country, I fought for our country on a different battlefield in Vietnam. Sometimes in an imperfect world a person might need to fight for his country. But no one -- no one -- should ever have to fight her country!"

Nodding humbly in silent agreement, her brown eyes floating in a sea of years, Brenda stood still. "For my service in Vietnam I was awarded the Bronze Star," I whispered. "For your gallantry, Brenda, you were awarded reform school, and cruel exile from your family and home state. You were so many times more heroic than I ever was! I want you to have my Bronze Star, Brenda, for your heroism. You already have my heart and my admiration."

Plunging us into tearful embrace again, Brenda whispered through her sobs, "I don't know what to say." "You don't have to say anything," I said. "I thought about saving my medals for my children," I confessed, "maybe giving my bronze star to my son, so my children would have something to remember me by. Then I thought, no, this is how I want to be remembered: Brenda Travis gave her youth for civil rights for all Americans, daddy gave his Bronze Star to Brenda Travis."

This week I'm remembering two civil rights heroines. Thank you, Rosa Parks... and Brenda Travis.