Civil Rights Warrior Still in the Battle

By Mary Welch

Evelyn Gibson Lowery knows when her life changed. It was 1979 during a march in Decatur, Ala., in defense of Tommy Lee Hines, who was accused of raping a white woman. The marchers, including her husband, the Rev. Joseph Lowery, were on the front lines walking and were met by the Ku Klux Klan wielding billy clubs. "We couldn't turn back, but the men asked us – the women – not to march beside them but behind. I was asked to drive the car right behind them," she recalls.

The marchers regrouped and kept moving forward. Suddenly, shots rang out and several young men up front were shot. Another bullet hit the car and Mrs. Lowery ducked. A split second later, another bullet when straight over the steering wheel where her head had just been. "It was a narrow escape, but I knew that we were all in this together," she adds. "I was part of the Civil Rights Movement and I became very focused. I knew why God had put me here. I knew it was my destiny."

Evelyn Lowery was born to her role as civil rights activist, a role she has not relinquished even today. She is still active in Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)/Women's Organizational Movement for Equality Now, Inc. (WOMEN), which she founded in 1979 to champion the rights of women, children and families, as well as to respond to the problems of the disenfranchised.

The daughter of a minister, her father was head of the NAACP in Memphis, Tenn. Following college, she moved to Birmingham, Ala., where she met her husband. "He was much older in his lifestyle than his years," she recalls. "He was meeting with my father about matters of the church, but also about the rights of black people." They married in 1947 and moved to Mobile, Ala., where he served as pastor of a church and she took on the traditional role of a preacher's wife.

There was a revolution brewing, but it was very low key and very localized, she says. "In each of the cities in Alabama, particularly, there were meetings. There was so much segregation in the South. It was so poisonous. So much so that in each of these cities, people were tired of it. You had my husband in Mobile and Dr. King in Montgomery, where he founded the Montgomery Improvement Association. You had Charles K. Steele doing the same thing. You had the Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth in Birmingham. They knew each other and they came and supported each other's efforts. They got together for the Montgomery Bus Boycott [1955-56] and realized that there was strength in the power to bring about change. So they formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. It was a powerful instrument."

Mrs. Lowery, even as a child, was used to her father and others trying to fight Jim Crow laws, but with the formation of the SCLC, there was strength in the numbers and a mission and a creed – using nonviolence methods to end segregation.

And the numbers included a lot of women.

"Women – black and white – took on a powerful role in the movement," says U.S. Rep. John Lewis. "The women, as a group, never ever received the credit they should have received. They were so brave, so courageous, so daring. The reason why they didn't get that credit is male chauvinism at its best – or worst."

"Mrs. Lowery, along with her sisters in the struggle, was (and is) a rock for her husband, Dr. Joseph Lowery. She was an unyielding force who allowed him to serve the entire community because she served by his side," says Lisa Borders, president of the Atlanta City Council and granddaughter of the Rev. William Holmes Borders Sr., pastor of the Auburn Avenue Wheat Street Baptist Church and a civil rights activist.

"Traditionally, women have tended the home fires," Borders adds. "The women of the Civil Rights Movement were instrumental in not only maintaining their personal homes, but creating an environment which would offer community hope and unfettered opportunity ... where every individual could achieve his/her full potential. These women endured personal sacrifice – leading by example – to demonstrate the magnitude of their individual and collective commitment to the cause."

Dr. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, founder and

Photography By Joseph Wong

Evelyn Lowery
Founder SCLC/WOMEN
Civil Rights Activist

director of Spelman College's Women's Research and Resource Center, believes the women, like Mrs. Lowery, didn't get enough credit. "She was a strategist, not just a foot soldier," Dr. Guy-Seftall says. "She just wasn't following, she was a real contributor. That was one of the reasons why she founded SCLC WOMEN because she knew how important the women's contributions were and that they needed a separate organization to support them."

Even 40 years later, Dr. Guy-Sheftall believes the complete story of the women during the movement is not being completely told. "There are some books, but even the story of Rosa Parks is incomplete. She just wasn't a tired old woman looking for a seat. The narrative hasn't been changed. It was the men who wrote the history and it keeps being repeated. Plus you had such an iconic figure who loomed so large (Dr. King) that there was no room for the women to squeeze in."

Alexis Scott, publisher of the *Atlanta Daily World*, says that while the organizations such as the Montgomery Improvement Association, were led by men, the "women were actually very involved. Evelyn Lowery was in that group of women who understood that the men had to take the forefront position but, as the movement evolved, she was able to take a leadership position through SCLC WOMEN," Scott says. "She was a woman of her time and a preacher's wife, and the mother of daughters. She had to play the hostess role and support her husband. It was very difficult for women of her time to step out and expand on their traditional roles, but she did."

Of Mrs. Lowery, Congressman Lewis says, "She is doing a superb job in her own right leading SCLC WOMEN. She is a leader in her own right, not just a shadow of her husband."

Lewis is right. Even when she wasn't on the front lines, Mrs. Lowery was in the battle – even in her own home. "We lived a couple of doors down from the church and on the street was an all-night restaurant with a loud jukebox," she says. "There would be a green truck that would drive around the neighborhood that carried bombs. We felt that because of that restaurant, it was harder for them to bomb us."

Another friend, a white minister at Spring Hill College in Montgomery, would send college kids to infiltrate Klan meetings. "They would find out what the plans were. We'd get a call telling us to go to the back of the house because they were planning to bomb us."

She said they didn't really focus on the big picture. "We didn't look at it as changing history. There was so much to do, we just focused on the next thing, the next march, and then we lived life in between."

Their activism put their three daughters in physical risk, something that she struggled with, but knew it was necessary.

Timetable through History

As an advocate for the non-violent change of the rampant injustices imposed on citizens throughout the world, Mrs. Lowery has marched and organized, been shot at and jailed, served and sacrificed for the cause of justice and equality

1965

Marched in the historic Selma to Montgomery March and has re-enacted the trip several times since.

1979

Mrs. Lowery was shot at twice by KKK in Decatur, Alabama, while driving a car during a SCLC demostration in defense of a young, black, retarded man, Tommy Lee Hines.

Seeing a special need for women and families, Mrs. Lowery invited a small group of women to become The SCLC/W.O.M.E.N., INC.

1980

Mrs. Lowery founded The Drum Major for Justice Awards Dinner.

1983

Mrs. Lowery was arrested by North Carolina Highway Patrol officials, when she participated in the protest to halt the State's dumping of polyclorinated biphenlys (PCB) in the largely rural, poor African-American community of Afton. She was charged with impeding traffic, and spent a night in jail with four other women: Armenta Eaton, Dollie Burwell, Sherrie Swift and Jocelyn McKissick.

Mrs. Lowery said she was "Sensitive to the plight of he people of Afton because of the life-threatening condition of the chenical waste, and the stress of the psychological affects on women and children." She called the dumping of PCB an "impending danger."

1984

She was jailed in Washington, D.C. while demostrating for the abolishment of apartheid at the South African Embassy.

1985

Mrs. Lowery spent Thanksgiving holiday in an Atlanta jail for demonstrating against apartheid.

1987

Mrs. Lowery founded The Evelyn Gibson Lowery Civil Rights Heritage Tour, a 2-day motor coach tour through Alabama.

1988

Mrs. Lowery founded the Women's Empowerment Training Center for GED/computer training.

1994

Organized "Toy Gun" Exchange Campaign, encouraging youth to bring in toys representing violence and receive non-violent toys.

1995

Mrs. Lowery created The Bridging the Gap: Girls to Women mentoring program.

Mrs. Lowery led the purchase and renovation of the historic Tabor Building on Auburn Avenue, in which houses the offices and programs of SCLC/W.O.M.E.N., INC.

"Women - black and white - took on a powerful role in the movement," says Cong. John Lewis. "The women, as a group, never ever received the credit they should have received. They were so brave, so courageous, so daring. The reason why they didn't get that credit is male chauvinism at its best - or worst."

"Our children became a part of it," she says. "They didn't understand a lot, but they knew what we were going through. We all lived with the bomb threats and we counted on the congregation and God to protect us. But of course it affected them."

Mrs. Lowery can recall names, dates and marches as if it were yesterday. She is particularly interested in telling the stories of women. "There were so many unsung heroes," she says. "There was Amelia Boynton Robinson and Marie Foster. They marched in Selma, but to hear it, only Hosea Williams and John Lewis were there. Well, they were up front, but there was a lot of women in the crowd behind them!"

One of her most vivid memories is the 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery, which many mark as the political and emotional peak of the Civil Rights Movement. The march for voting rights was actually conceived by a woman, Amelia Boynton Robinson, and her husband. It actually took three separate attempts to walk from Selma to the state capital in Montgomery. During the first march on March 7, 1965, 600, civil rights marchers were attacked by state and local police with billy clubs, bull whips and tear gas. The marchers only made it as far as the Edmund Pettus Bridge before turning back. Brutal televised images of the attack, dubbed "Bloody Sunday," roused popular support for the Civil Rights Movement. Amelia Boynton Robinson was beaten and gassed nearly to death.

Another woman, Viola Russo Kelly, was killed. "She's got to be remembered," Mrs. Lowery says. "She came from Detroit; left her children to join us and gave her life. Her daughters have come with me to Selma to learn about their mother. They had no idea."

After Bloody Sunday, "A lot of the leaders just wanted to go back marching even if it meant violence," she recalls. Dr. King called for a second march on March 9, 1965, and it attracted people from around the country called into action after seeing the earlier violence. However, a judge issued a restraining order preventing the march from taking place. "Dr. King saw that it would lead to more tragedy and he decided he couldn't lead the march. So he went to the Edmund Pettus Bridge, held a prayer session and turned around. It was necessary."

On March 24, the marchers eventually made it to Montgomery. Five months later, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965. "It was a historic events and so gratifying," is all she will say.

The Lowerys moved to Atlanta in 1968 just after Dr. King was killed and Dr. Lowery became head of the SCLC. "It was a sad time. We had been to Atlanta so many times to meet with Dr. King and to come here and him not be here, it was a difficult time."

She and her husband have worked separately and together for their causes. "We have seen eye-to-eye," she says. "I was brought up in the Civil Rights Movement so it was not difficult for me to identify with his goals and philosophy. We lost ourselves to the cause. It was romantic in a dangerous sort of way."

Even after the Civil Rights Movement was no longer front-page news, Mrs. Lowery continued her struggle. She was arrested in 1983 in North Carolina when she protested the state's dumping of polychlorinated biphenyl (PCP) in a largely rural, poor African-American community. More than a decade later, in 1984, she was jailed in Washington D.C. when she demonstrated against apartheid in South Africa. "I've been arrested three times," she says with visible pride.

Today, she still works at the SCLC WOMEN's offices at Auburn Avenue and oversees many programs, mostly involving women and children. She instituted a WOMEN's Empowerment Training Center that provides computer and personal development skills training for adults, teen parents and the homeless. Bridging the Gap is another program aimed at helping girls 8 years old to 18 grow positively into womanhood, and she started several health and welfare programs on such topics as AIDS, child abuse and domestic violence.

The SCLC/WOMEN's most visible program is the annual heritage educational tour that originates in Atlanta and retraces the steps of the Civil Rights Movement throughout Alabama. Attendees view the landmarks, relieve the events and talk with the people who were there.

"Perhaps Mrs. Lowery's and the SCLC/Women's most important function is in spreading the word to the next generation about the history of the Civil Rights Movement," says Scott. "With her trips, she is showing people the history of a place so they get a better sense of what happened. People today aren't aware of the personal sacrifice those in the movement made to make our lives possible today – they were only dreams back then. That is a very significant contribution."

Today, Mrs. Lowery is proud of her achievements, but also humble about them. She is indeed a "women of her time," as Scott says. Mrs. Lowery says she was "sincerely committed, dedicated to the cause of freedom and justice and feels good she influenced that." But then she quickly adds that she was a "minister's wife for 40 years and during that time that was part of the mission of the church."

She may be organizing trips to the spot where a bullet almost killed her instead of marching, but her cause still rages strong within her. "The civil rights struggle doesn't seem behind us," she says. "The battle, the struggle, still continues." ♀