

THE LION

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THE LEGACY OF MICHAEL SCHWERNER

Legacy. In the fraternity community, this word has special importance. Legacy is when a son becomes a Brother after his father. Legacy is why we take composite photos. Legacy is why we work together to positively influence our communities.

For Michael "Mickey" Schwerner (Cornell 1961), his legacy is not solely comprised of his own actions. For Michael Schwerner, his legacy continues long after he and his co-workers Andrew Goodman and James Chaney were murdered on June 21, 1964.

THE LEGACY OF MICHAEL SCHWERNER



On June 29, 1964 the FBI began distributing this picture of civil rights worker Michael H. Schwerner (Cornell 1961), who disappeared near Philadelphia, Miss., on June 21, 1964. (AP Photo/FBI)

“I don’t think we had a sense of how serious and how difficult that whole situation was down there,” said John Garment (Cornell 1960), Schwerner’s roommate in the fraternity house. “Because I didn’t see him after he left (for Mississippi) and I hadn’t really talked to him, I never had any sense of the level of danger.”

Their violent murder was front-page news across the nation, and their story was later made into the movie “Mississippi Burning.” The three are remembered because they sacrificed their lives in order to achieve social change.

But Schwerner’s legacy is not solely comprised of what happened in Mississippi one night in 1964. Schwerner’s story of changing things around him includes how his death has continued to shape history.

A JOURNEY OF A THOUSAND MILES BEGINS WITH A SINGLE STEP

After graduation from high school, Michael Schwerner attended Michigan State and supplemented his academics with involvement in Alpha Epsilon Pi. Schwerner pledged the Chi Chapter of the fraternity during the spring of his freshman year. After his freshman year, Schwerner trans-

ferred to Cornell University and continued his involvement in Alpha Epsilon Pi.

The son of parents who worked as union organizers in New York City, Schwerner was taught early on to respect all races.

“Mickey was the kind of person who was always upset at the idea of social injustice,” said John Garment (Cornell 1963), who was Schwerner’s roommate for a year in the AEPi house. “It was engrained in him from his family who were extremely socially aware.”

Garment and Schwerner remained friends after graduation, and shared a small apartment in the Bronx after graduation. Schwerner was enrolled in Columbia University master’s program in social work.

“Mickey was very outgoing, and just sort of interested in the things that were going on in the neighborhood,” said Garment. In April 1962, Garment moved to Europe, and when he returned, Schwerner had met Rita Levant. After the couple was married, they moved to Brooklyn.

“When he and Rita were living in Brooklyn,” said Garment, “they became seriously involved in things.”

Things meaning the civil rights movement.

FREEDOM SUMMER

Schwerner was deeply disturbed by the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., in September 1963, which killed four young black girls. Having been involved in passive demonstrations in the New York and D.C., Schwerner decided to do more. He requested to work as a CORE recruit in the South.

The Schwerners moved to Meridian, Miss., in January 1964. While there, Schwerner worked closely with 21-year-old James Chaney, a young black man who was very involved in the civil rights movement. The two organized boycotts and led voting registration efforts for blacks. Their work aroused the animosity of white supremacists, who referred to Schwerner as “Goatee” and “Jew-Boy.”

On the evening of June 16, Klansmen went to Mt. Zion Methodist Church, a church that Schwerner and Chaney had arranged to use as a Freedom School. Schwerner was not there at the time. He and Chaney were in Oxford, Ohio, training new CORE recruits. But this didn’t stop the Klansmen from beating several black members who were present and then torching the church.

When Schwerner learned that the Mt. Zion church had been burned, he and Chaney quickly returned to Mississippi, accompanied a new CORE volunteer, 20-year old Andrew Goodman. Together, the three inspected the burned church and interviewed those who were beaten.

On their way home, the three men were arrested and then finally released late at night. On their way home, the three were stopped by Klansmen, who took them to a remote location. They were beaten, shot and buried just a few miles from Mt. Zion Methodist Church.

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This June 1964 FBI photograph shows the scene where the burned station wagon driven by James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Mickey Schwerner was found shortly after their disappearance. The car was discovered at the Bogue Chitto swamp some 13 miles northeast of Philadelphia. (AP Photo/State of Mississippi, Attorney General's Office)



Their disappearance—two Jewish men and a black man—drew national attention. It took the FBI two days to find the workers' burned station wagon and 44 days for their bodies to be found.

"Their deaths are being credited for triggering a lot of what followed in the entire civil rights movement," said Garment.

Their deaths made headlines all over the country and provoked an outpouring of national support for the Civil Rights Movement, including the final impetus needed for the 1964 Civil Rights Act to pass Congress on July 2, 1964.

Their murders also brought national attention to voter registration drives and brought new attention to black disenfranchisement. This eventually led to the 1965 Voting Rights Act, federal legislation that outlawed literacy tests and other tactics Southern states had used to prevent blacks from voting.

In 1967, the federal government prosecuted 14 men, including several Ku Klux Klan members, for violating the victims' civil rights. Of those charged, the jurors convicted seven, acquitted three and deadlocked on three, including being deadlocked 11-1 in favor of the guilt of one Edgar Ray Killen.

Seven Klansmen went to prison; none served more than six years. None was ever charged with murder.

FOUR DECADES LATER

For years, Schwerner's work and the work of other civil rights pioneers was been the subject of countless newspaper articles, documentaries and Hollywood movies. Their murders, along with other murders of the era, were never forgotten. However, it seemed as if no one would ever be convicted any of these civil rights murders.

But after three decades of no movement on these and other civil rights murders, prosecutors across the South began to reopen civil rights cases that had either never been tried or had been tried on lesser charges.

First was Byron De La Beckwith's 1994 conviction for the 1963 murder of NAACP leader Medgar Evers, whose murder was made famous in "Ghosts of Mississippi."

In 1998, Imperial Wizard Sam Bowers was convicted of the 1966 murder of Hattiesburg, Miss., NAACP President Vernon Dahmer.

Then, in 1999, the Schwerner case was reopened after *The Clarion-Ledger* of Jackson, Miss., published exposés, including excerpts from a secret interview by Sam Bowers. In the interview, Bowers said he had thwarted justice in the killings of Schwerner, Goodman and Chaney. Bowers also said in the interview that he did not mind going to jail because a fellow Klansman had gotten away with murder.

In January 2005, Edgar Ray Killen was arrested for the murder of the three civil rights workers. Forty-one years to the day after the three civil rights workers were ambushed and killed by a Ku Klux Klan mob, a jury of nine whites and three blacks rejected the charges of murder but found 80-year-old Killen guilty of recruiting the mob that carried out the killings. He received a sentence of 60 years in jail—20 years for each count of manslaughter.

SCHWERNER'S LEGACY

Just as Schwerner, Goodman and Chaney's disappearance and murder in 1964 shined the light on the civil rights movement, the 2005 conviction of Edgar Ray Killen has shined new light on other decades' old crimes and injustices.

A few weeks before the Killen conviction, the U.S. Senate issued an apology for never having made lynching a federal crime. And shortly after the Killen conviction, the FBI has reopened the investigation into the 1955 slaying of Emmett Till, who was lynched for allegedly whistling at a white woman.

Schwerner's life and his death serves as a reminder to all of us of how times have changed, and how each step in the story of his legacy is one step closer to the ideals he believed in so strongly.