

The Morris Dees Legacy Fund

October 25, 2014

Today, we gather in this historic church to recognize the life's work of Morris Dees and to commit to a future where his legacy of service to those that have no voice will continue.

Montgomery, Alabama, a City that sits on the soil of shared sorrows for those that suffered and died for equality. A place of repose. Monuments of stone that connect us to each other. A place of hope and promise. A place to lay our grief down and shoulder the burden of moving beyond the sunset of despair to the place we call justice for all.

All of us come to this moment and to this place, on the road of our own life's personal journey. We are diverse, both in our personal experiences and our aspirations and dreams. But we are united in the common belief that the life's work of Morris Dees and his vision for a just America is worth the saving.

Stepping away from a painful past has not always been easy but it has always been right.

None of us can be responsible for the circumstances of our birth, but each of us will be held responsible for what we have become.

For many years, I lived a life of quiet indifference behind the gates of the Alabama Governor's Mansion as the war for equality was fought. It offered me a place of refuge as my father Governor George Wallace stood on the wrong side of justice, riding on the wings of fear rather than seeking justice on the wings of eagles.

But from the vortex of injustice, arose men such as Morris Dees who understood that the journey toward a just America lay in the hearts of American men women and children who dreamed for a day when justice would roll down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream.

Through his life of service Morris Dees has promoted the notion that America is at her best when she embraces all of us, protects the least of us and offers her bounty of hope and prosperity to not just some of us.

When Morris Dees and I were children, racial segregation was a cultural norm throughout the South. It created a culture of indifference across America. It was the American apartheid.

Racial intolerance crept around the outskirts of town. It was not something you knew; it was something you lived. At first, it wasn't raucous and didn't cause much trouble, but the callouses it grew on

African American mother's and father's hearts marked them so that their children could see their future in their eyes. Whole generations came and went. Some followed the bright lined roads out of the south while others stayed and watched with crooked smiles as the roads took a bend and brought them right back again.

But then there were voices. Hardly discernible at first, then growing louder. Songs of despair faded under the bolder rhythms of anthems of defiance.

America was creeping toward equality and destiny was propelling Morris Dees into the vortex of the fight for justice in Alabama and throughout the nation.

In 1996, my husband and I took our then eight-year old son, Burns, to Atlanta to visit the Martin Luther King National Historic Site. The museum chronicled the life and times of Dr. Martin Luther King including his fight for freedom in Alabama. As we moved through the exhibits, we turned a corner only to face the visual images of the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, fire hoses in Birmingham and a defiant George Wallace standing in the schoolhouse door.

Burns stood silent for a long pause and a look of sadness came over his face. He turned to me and asked, “Why did Paw Paw do those things to other people?”

I realized that at that moment I was at a crossroad in my life and the life of my son. The mantle had passed and it was now up to me to do for Burns what my father never did for me.

It was the first step in my journey of building a legacy of my own. I knelt down beside my son, drew him close and said.

“Paw Paw never told me why he did those things, but I know that he was wrong. So maybe it will just have to be up to me and you to help make things right.”

From that day forward, I knew that I had an obligation to my children and to myself to raise the call for justice in my lifetime.

My support of the Southern Poverty Law Center and the work of its courageous leadership is yet another fulfillment of the promise that I made to my two sons.

The Southern Poverty Law Center informs us that there is power in confidence, in feeling loved and respected for who you are and what you believe, it is the reaching out and touching a soul that brings out the humanity in others, the laying of a stone on the foundation of another

one's life. Working each day to inspire the nobility that lies in the heart of each of us.

Morris Dees and the Southern Poverty Law Center teach us that we must live our lives with inspiration, always aspiring to make the choices that lead us to higher ground, that guides us to understanding and purpose, of not just who we are but who we can become.

An opportunity for each of you, an obligation for all of us, to see others, feel others and celebrate others, respecting their humanity for who they are. Working each day to inspire the nobility that lies in the heart of each of us. Each one of us has the will to change first our own lives and then the lives of others.

There is power in each of us to reach out, to believe, to support and to stand firm in the belief that all of our lives count for something.

That is the message of inspiration that those that have no voice hope for, a moment of self-revelation, an emboldened heart, a rising spirit from the depths of despair. And that is what Morris Dees and the Southern Poverty Law Center stand for. One can never measure the true worth of a mended heart that beats again because someone cared.

When I reflect on the life of Morris Dees, I am reminded of the days when I was a small child and would walk beside my grandfather,

Mr. Henry, while he and his plow mule Bertis, broke ground for summer crops.

Mr. Henry held the reins tight so he could guide Bertis in a straight line from one end of the field to the other. I carried a branch off a sweet gum tree to use on Bertis's backside if she tried to kick over the traces.

Traces were the long pieces of leather that connected the plow to the harness around Bertis's neck. If Bertis had kicked over the traces she would be out of control and would most likely walk through the field like she wanted to rather than how Mr. Henry thought she was supposed to.

I remember Bertis and Mr. Henry working the fields in the dying light of a summer's day and I smile when I think that perhaps Morris has done something that Bertis was never allowed to do. His life has always been about jumping the traces and plowing furrows of his own.

Morris's life has never been about sticking to the straight line with his soul burdened by other's expectations. There are those that look over their shoulders at Morris, as they are confined by the traces of the past and criticize his wandering.

But for all those that believe in change and truth, the fallow fields of America are a patchwork of lines, angles, circles and squares created by men and women like Morris Dees - a generation of Americans who have dared to kick over the traces.

There will be no more stands in the schoolhouse door, but how many hearts will be broken and lives wasted on the wrong side of the schoolhouse door.

There will be no more fire hoses and police dogs in Birmingham but how many low-income Americans will see their children suffer and die for lack of access to healthcare.

The Edmund Pettus Bridge is now a monument to change rather than a battleground for justice, but how far has America really come if there are thousand upon thousands of Americans who still cannot vote.

How many more anniversaries of the struggle for civil rights can we celebrate by looking over our shoulders rather than standing shoulder to shoulder to face the challenges ahead?

How can our children reach for higher ground if we do not inspire them with what we do?

How can we educate our children about positive social change if we see injustice and turn our backs?

How can we do nothing when we read about gun violence, dead end streets of opportunities, lost and thrown away children in jail and expect our children to do something.

Tolerance must be more than what we believe, it must be what we live, and teaching tolerance is what we must do.

The Morris Dees Legacy fund will ensure that Morris's important work will continue. His voice for justice and dignity cannot be stilled by the inevitable consequence of his life. For injustice knows no death. It rises like a dark mist on the horizon, laying low in the hearts of those that are unwilling to accept the notion of unconditional love and understanding and that it is our diversity that makes us strong.

Your continued financial support will allow opportunities for future generations to journey along the road less traveled. It will give hope through teaching others that **LIVING along the road less traveled can work miracles in the lives of our fellow man. And it will teach that all people deserve the bounty that comes with living life without fear and broken hearts...**

As supporters of the Morris Dees Legacy Fund and the Southern Poverty Law Center, we walk the pathway forward where truth and justice will light our way. One day history will inform our children and

grandchildren of the times of our lives. We should be mindful of what it will say.

While some may climb mountains, for the rest of us there are untold numbers of small hills that we can master; tokens and gestures, words and deeds that can change a life and even change history.

We cannot celebrate how far we have come unless we commit to the struggle that lies ahead.

We must challenge one another to stand our ground, to be courageous, to proclaim a victory of our own, and rise up for ourselves and for our dignity

We must be better not bitter, not wishing for better tomorrows, but making better tomorrows happen.

AND WE WILL lift up hope for all of our children so that when their time comes, they shall be stronger, because we lived.