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From Segregation, Lessons for Lifetime Siblings who Faced Prejudice in South Embraced Civil Rights

By Avis Thomas Lester
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Paula Stern has vivid memories of the two storms that swept through Memphis on April 4, 1968: a midnight tornado that left part of the city in a shambles and a firestorm that erupted there 18 hours later, after the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was fatally shot.

Stern was a Harvard graduate student visiting home when riots broke out in Memphis and dozens of other cities that night, 43 years ago this week. She and two siblings had grown up as children of the Jim Crow South and gained a perspective on the civil rights struggle, as members of a Jewish family, that many white people didn't have.

Their parents, Lloyd and Fannye Stern, owned a furniture store in a majority-black area of Memphis. They counted blacks among their friends and openly supported King's efforts.

Stern, a longtime resident of Northwest Washington, rose to prominence as chairman of the International Trade Commission in the Reagan administration. Her brother, Gerald Stern, who also lives in the District, gained renown as a civil rights attorney in the Justice Department and, later, as a crusading litigator in private practice.

Sunday, Paula Stern will attend a forum at the Newseum honoring the Freedom Riders, who traveled by bus throughout the South testing antidiscrimination policy.

Gerald Stern will be on the panel, having worked in the Justice Department to make sure there was no interference in their efforts. The forum is sponsored by an educational organization, Facing History and Ourselves. Its founder: their sister, Margot Stern Strom of Boston.



Lloyd and Fannye Stern owned a store in a black area of Memphis and openly supported civil rights.

"Our whole life," said Strom, "has been bookended by the civil rights movement."

The Sterns faced prejudice themselves. Once in high school, Paula Stern was told that she couldn't try out for cheerleading because the squad "already had a Jew."

Racists left death threats in the family's mailbox after a newspaper story was published about Gerald Stern's work as a young attorney for the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division.

"We were just devastated about Dr. King because he was a hero in our house," said Paula Stern, 66.

King had traveled to Memphis on April 3 to help organize a march by thousands of black sanitation workers. That night, more than 2,000 people braved a driving rainstorm to see King deliver his "I Have Been to the Mountaintop" speech at the Mason Temple. Less than 24 hours later, as he stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel preparing to go to dinner at the home of a local minister, King was fatally shot by prison escapee James Earl Ray.

Demonstrators took to the streets. The Sterns followed developments on TV and radio. Lloyd Stern was so agitated that his heart beat erratically. When the family finally reached his doctor, Fannye Stern, his wife, was ordered to take the 65-year-old merchant to the emergency room.

The next morning, Lloyd Stern returned to the family's furniture store to find that it had been looted, despite his efforts to save it.

He had covered the plate-glass windows with plywood and the plywood with copies of news stories about Gerald Stern advising James Meredith as he became the first African American to enroll at the University of Mississippi.

He hoped the articles "might be a talisman to protect the store against those who would stereotype him as the ghetto store owner," Paula Stern said. "He wanted people to know that [he was] a man who raised his son to work to get the rights that what then would have been called the Negro community deserved."

Gerald Stern, 74, has also written about the incident and the broader civil rights movement.

After leaving the Justice Department, he became a litigator in private practice. He represented the families of 125 men who were killed in the Buffalo Creek, W.Va., coal mine disaster in 1972 and, four years later, the families of 15 miners who died at the Scotia Mine in Kentucky. He wrote books about both cases and also chronicled his life growing up in Memphis and his civil rights work.

In a speech called "Justice," Stern once explained how witnessing the movement had affected him.

"I felt I could use my law school education to bring justice to blacks in the South," the Harvard law graduate wrote. "Though I was white, I identified with the blacks, with the victims, rather than with the White Southern establishment, so it was easy for me to imagine that their struggle was one I should join. I was able to imagine myself in the shoes of those black people, powerless, ignored; maybe because that is the way I personally felt growing up in the South."

Margot Stern Strom, his sister, founded Facing History and Ourselves 35 years ago. The educational organization engages students of diverse backgrounds in discussions on racism and prejudice.

Sunday's forum is part of a larger program that Facing History has staged at the Historical Society of Washington, "Choosing to Participate," which challenges people to "explore issues of prejudice, injustice, courage and compassion." Serving on the forum panel with Gerald Stern will be Bernard Lafayette Jr., a co-founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and John L. Seigenthaler, a former journalist and administrative assistant to then-U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy.

The lot on old Highway 51 in Memphis where Lloyd Furniture once stood is overgrown with weeds now. It, like the Chinese restaurant across the street and other businesses that lined the stretch, never recovered from the riots, though Lloyd and Fannye Stern held on until she died in 1973 and he moved to Chicago to live with Strom.

Despite the destruction, the elder Sterns were never angry, their children said. What the city had witnessed that night was a "revolution," Fan Stern told her daughter, and revolution comes at a cost.