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Lessons of 'struggle' possess a role today

By [Rick Badie](#)

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She got arrested four times. She slept on cold, concrete jail floors. Jailers cursed her.

She was a teen at the time, a 16-year-old protesting state-sanctioned segregation in Albany, her hometown. Gloria Ward Wright, now 61, doesn't think she suffered all that much.

Others, she said, fared worse.

"I rode the paddy wagon," she told me, "but I didn't get hurt like some of my classmates. One girl went to a mental institution, and she hasn't been the same since."

On Monday, the country pauses to observe the first and only black man to be honored with a federal holiday. There will be parades, marches, songs and sermons. Yet it seems like the essence of the holiday, reflection on the civil rights era, rings hollow.

Maybe it's because we're fat, jaded, content. Maybe it's because we're taught so little history about anything, much less what truly transpired back then. We lack knowledge of the unnamed and unheralded folks who risked life and limb for a moral movement.

Or as the old-timers call it, "the struggle."

"After a while, it's going to be hard to believe it even happened," said Wright, a retired high school teacher who holds master's and doctorate degrees in theology/pastoral studies. "We say keep Dr. King's dream alive. Well, we have to keep the kids alive. The things that happen to kids today — it's mind-boggling."

Wright wants youth of all hues to know America's civil rights history. Most important, she wants them to understand they can be agents of change. She's written and self-published a book about the Albany movement. It's called "From the Back of the Line: The Views of a Teenager From the Civil Rights Movement." It includes a poignant foreword written by a white Albany native on a path of reconciliation and redemption. (More on that later.)

Wright's story doesn't end with the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. She chronicles her life from the back of the line to current roles of activism. She taught high school for 25 years; she's been a minister for 20, and is a former pastor of Simmons Chapel AME Zion Church in Lawrenceville. She's currently on tour for her book.

"The clarion call is to help — to help the homeless, to help the hurting, to help the hungry, to help the lost, to help the least, and yes, to help those left behind," she writes in the book.

It's a mind-set shared by Robbie S. Moore, president of the United Ebony Society of Gwinnett County. The group recently lobbied hold-outs Snellville and Grayson to observe King Day. Wright's book made Moore cry.

"The desire was in her heart to make a difference," she said. "If only young people had that same feeling today."

In 1962, a rally in Albany drew national media. Wright, then 16, was in the thick of it.

An Associated Press story about the protest quoted two opposing views — those of Kay Smith, an 18-year-old white girl, and Wright's. Their photos appeared with the article. The girls didn't know each other; they attended segregated schools.

"I will give up my life for freedom and the children I hope to have someday," Wright told the reporter.

Smith expressed an opposing view, one learned from her racist family, she told me.

The marches were "useless" and "just for publicity," she told the reporter. She proclaimed herself a segregationist.

Those words haunt Smith to this day. She's a Pedrotti now, but there's been a profound change in her life aside from the name.

For decades, Pedrotti tried to find Wright. The women found each other through a mutual acquaintance. They met for the first time in 1997. An apology was given. Forgiveness offered. Foes became friends.

In 2000, Wright invited Pedrotti to Simmons Chapel AME Zion Church for a service of racial harmony. Journalists who attended the event wrote and photographed the women just as they'd done decades ago.

"Every day of my life, I regret saying what I said in that story," Pedrotti told me. "I know I've been forgiven for it a dozen times by the Lord, Gloria and other friends, black and white.

"But it still hurts."

Pedrotti, a former AJC reporter, lives in Lamar County. She, like Wright, shares the mission to educate. She said young people, black or white, aren't taught to respect people responsible for positive racial change. The fact that schools trivialize things such as the civil rights movement and Holocaust doesn't help.

"There has to be an intensive study," she said.

Pedrotti gives workshops that help (mostly white) congregations understand their own prejudices. She's a trained "anti-racism facilitator" for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

"Ask any 10 white people you know if they think they are privileged," she said. "They will tell you, 'no.' "

In the foreword she wrote for the book, Pedrotti praises Wright for her activism, past and current.

"The back of the line, the cold concrete floors of the jails, the swelling songs of the march — these things helped to shape her into the vessel that overflows with love," she wrote. "I've been splashed again and again.

"Thank you Mrs. Gloria Ward Wright."

For more information about Gloria Ward Wright's book, visit [www2.xlibris.com](http://www2.xlibris.com).

> Rick Badie's column appears on Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. Contact him at 770-263-3875 or e-mail [rbadie@ajc.com](mailto:rbadie@ajc.com).

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