

CPCS Honors the Life and Work of the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr.

If the women... had not been there... night after night to support Dr. King, the movement would have failed. The Honorable Constance Baker Motley

As we honor the life of the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. and his contributions to the cause of civil rights and justice, we should always consider the full dimension of all those who contributed to this effort. The work of others can get lost in the light of this great leader. There were many who made a difference within the movement, and of these there were many women, whose contributions have been blurred due to sex bias and racism.

It is first essential to recognize Coretta Scott King, Dr. King's wife, who left academic study and a potential career in music to join the path of activism through faith and song - a crusade that lasted long beyond her husband's assassination. In a 1966 quote, Mrs. King noted: "Not enough attention has been focused on the roles played by women in the struggle. By and large, men have formed the leadership in the civil rights struggle but ... women have been the backbone of the whole civil rights movement."

Mrs. King would go on to create and lead the King Center for Nonviolent Social Change and was the driving force behind the activism that led to the creation of the annual King national holiday.

These are just a few key additional leaders who worked closely with Dr. King:

- Dr. King's vision for nonviolent activism was moved to action by Dorothy Cotton, who was the education director for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. She was the only woman on the executive team and led training efforts for volunteer activists and typed the "I Have a Dream" speech.
- Jo Ann Robinson was a college professor known as the real architect of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, partly based on her experience of being verbally assaulted by a bus driver for sitting in the "whites only" section of a bus.
- Ella Baker was a key organizer and leader of student activists following the Greensboro Woolworth's lunch counter sit-in for the denial of meal service to Black people, and later founded the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights. Along with the iconic Rosa Parks and the famous gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, who sang to Dr. King when he was down and exhorted him to relate his "dream," the central role of women played in civil rights movement is manifest.

One woman who was especially critical to the movement and whose life and contributions complement the paramount proportions of Dr. King's work was the Honorable Constance Baker Motley. Born in New Haven, Connecticut in 1921 to immigrant parents from the Caribbean island of Nevis, Motley endured the racism and sexism of the 1940s while attending New York University and Columbia Law School, with the latter making concessions to accept women while men were at war. She served as a law clerk for the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund (LDF) and then went on to work at the LDF as the first and only woman attorney for more than 20 years, collaborating with Thurgood Marshall before his ascension to the bench.

Constance Baker Motley's achievements as a lawyer are exceptional under any appreciation of a body of law work:

- She wrote the first complaint in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which triggered the end to state-sanctioned segregation.
- She was an early advocate for the right to counsel in securing the overturning of a death sentence for a person arraigned without representation in *Hamilton v. Alabama*.
- She litigated cases that led to the end of segregated service at Memphis restaurants, and at Birmingham, Alabama, and Columbia, South Carolina lunch counters.
- She defended Freedom Riders and the 1,100 students who joined the street protests in Birmingham after school leadership attempted to expel them.
- She represented Dr. King against an injunction from marching in Albany, Georgia, and when he was detained in Birmingham.
- She secured the right for James Meredith to attend the University of Mississippi and for students to attend other state universities in the South.

Following this massive body of advocacy, Judge Motley went on to serve in the New York Senate and as Manhattan Borough President, and in 1966, became the first African American woman on the federal bench, serving from 1982 to 1986 as Chief Judge. On the bench, Judge Motley presided over numerous notable cases, making rulings that found solitary confinement to be cruel and unusual punishment, protected Vietnam War protesters from assault, and ordered that women journalists could enter Major League Baseball locker rooms.

She heard one of the first sex discrimination cases under Title VII, involving a law firm where the employer's counsel sought Judge Motley's recusal based on her gender and race experience. In a decision that resonates for all who serve our public defense mission and other social justice causes, Judge Motley noted, "(I)f background or race or sex of each judge were, by definition, sufficient grounds for removal, no judge on this court could hear this case."

As we honor the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., it is essential to honor all within this history who left a deep and indelible mark upon the civil rights movement and all who made contributions to the change that has enabled our society to form a true vision of democracy that unites us.

Here are links to events statewide and further reading for you to consider:

MLK Day events and further reading and viewing materials

Events: Free Ways to Get Involved and Volunteer:

Celebrating Service, Community, and Dr. King's LEGACY - Boston-Northeastern Mass
<https://www.bostoncares.org/mlkday>

Weekend of Purpose/ Cradles to Crayons - Boston
<https://www.cradlestocrayons.org/boston/take-action/mlk2023/>

Unveiling of The Embrace, a major sculpture honoring Dr. King and Mrs. King, January 13th - Boston

<https://www.embraceboston.org/events>

Annual MLK, Jr. Tribute Concert

<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/annual-mlk-jr-tribute-concert-free-tickets-408094300037>

COME LEND YOUR HELPING HANDS! - Cambridge

<https://manyhelpinghands365.org/>

Brookline Celebrates MLK Day 2023

<https://www.brooklinema.gov/465/MLK-Celebration-Committee>

MLK Day of Service, Berkshire Community College -Pittsfield

https://www.berkshireeagle.com/news/community-news/berkshire-community-college-mlk-day-of-service/article_67a00078-910e-11ed-ba01-933c281a3adf.html

MLK DAY 2023 - MLK Parades, Concerts, & Things To Do On Martin Luther King Jr. Day In Northampton, Massachusetts

<https://allevents.in/northampton-ma/martin-luther-king-day>

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Youth Breakfast – Worcester State University (free to first 200 registrants)

<https://www.worcester.edu/campus-life/student-services/multicultural-affairs/the-martin-luther-king-jr-youth-breakfast/>

Citywide Dr. King Day Celebration - Springfield

<https://www.communitymusicschool.com/event/citywide-dr-king-day-celebration/#:~:text=Collaborating%20community%20organizations%20will%20host,%3A00am%20to%201%3A00pm.>

CELEBRATION OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR DAY JANUARY 16 WITH INTERNATIONALLY ACCLAIMED CARTOONIST KEITH KNIGHT (Gloucester)

<https://goodmorninggloucester.com/tag/mlk-day/>

Free Events for Children (statewide)

<https://worcestercentralkidscalendar.com/fun-activities-mlk-school-vacation/>

METROWEST MLK DAY OF SERVICE SUNDAY, JANUARY 15 – Framingham

<https://www.bostonusa.com/event/metrowest-mlk-day-of-service-sunday-january-15/74185/>

For additional reading and viewing:

Wikipedia article – Coretta Scott King

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coretta_Scott_King

TV News Article - Remembering the women who helped MLK propel the civil rights movement
<https://www.13newsnow.com/article/news/remember-the-women-who-helped-mlk-propel-the-civil-rights-movement/291-9e5bcc46-783b-4dbb-a5e1-f3bfa7b8d204>

From Coretta Scott King to Ella Baker: These women's ideas were key to MLK's work
<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/coretta-scott-king-ella-baker-these-women-s-ideas-were-n1254184>

Celebration of the 100 years anniversary of Constance Baker Motley's life
<https://www.naacpldf.org/naacp-publications/ldf-blog/cbm-100/>

HLS Library Book Talk | Civil Rights Queen: Constance Baker Motley and the Struggle for Equality
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEa0mxKBQmI>

Law Review Essay – Identity Matters: The Case of Judge Constance Baker Motley
<https://columbialawreview.org/content/identity-matters-the-case-of-judge-constance-baker-motley/>

Often overlooked, civil rights advocate Constance Baker Motley gets her due
<https://www.npr.org/2022/02/16/1081108548/often-overlooked-civil-rights-advocate-constance-baker-motley-gets-her-due>

Smithsonian Magazine Article - Constance Baker Motley Taught the Nation How to Win Justice
<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/constance-baker-motley-how-to-win-justice-180979527/>