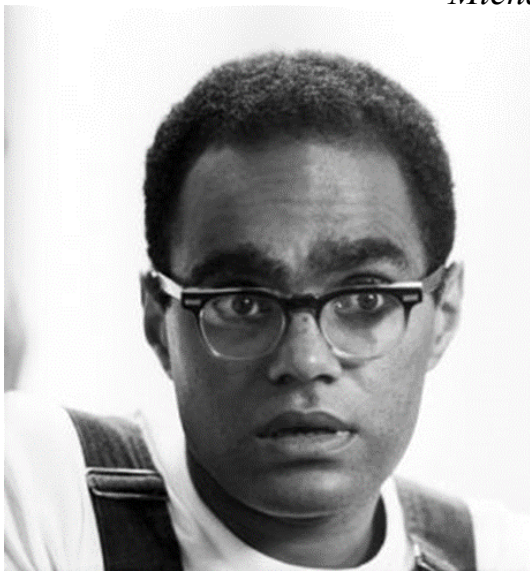


The Delray Democrat

Bob Moses – Organizer, Educator, Polymath: “This Was a Man”¹
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His life was gentle, and the elements
So mixed in him that Nature might stand up
And say to all the world, “This was a man.”
Julius Caesar, V.5:78-80

Robert Parris “Bob” Moses was one of the greatest – and least well known – organizers of the Civil Rights Era, a man whose courage was legendary even in a movement studded with martyrs.

The son of a Harlem janitor, Moses was initially headed for an academic career. After graduating from the prestigious Stuyvesant High School in New York, he received an undergraduate degree from Hamilton College in philosophy and French, a Masters’ degree from Harvard University in philosophy, and was working toward his doctorate at Harvard when he returned to New York to care for his ill father.

It never bothered Moses to remain in the background, as *The New York Times* noted in his obituary, for his interests lay in organizing and developing local organizers:

Typically dressed in denim bib overalls and seemingly more comfortable around sharecroppers than senators, he insisted that he was an organizer, not a leader. He said he drew inspiration from an older generation of civil rights organizers, like Ella Baker, a leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and her “quiet work in out-of-the-way places and the commitment of organizers digging into local communities.”

¹ *The Delray Democrat*, August 2021, p. 4.

“He exemplified putting community interests above ego and personal interest,” Derrick Johnson, the president of the N.A.A.C.P., said in a phone interview. “If you look at his work, he was always pushing local leadership first.”

In his obituary of Moses in *The Nation*, Professor Charles M. Payne recounts Moses’s response when asked to provide an example of “empowering grassroots leadership”:

Well, Mrs. [Hazel] Palmer... She really came to symbolize for me...this leadership phenomenon that Ella [Baker] pointed us to and she never became a media person. She always worked behind the scenes in the Freedom Democratic Party. She had been the janitor at one of the local schools and then her children got involved in the Freedom Rides in '61 and then she began to work with Medgar [Evers] and then when Medgar was assassinated in '63, she came over to the COFO [Council of Federated Organizations] office and started working with us and then she got involved in the Freedom Democratic Party and became sort of the chief networking person out of the Jackson office on the Watts line, so she really would do a whole lot of the calling and networking with groups across the country and really became very sophisticated in her understanding of the movement and the organizing, what the movement was trying to do with poor people like her.... So, Mrs. Palmer, I used to go around and talk about her because she really came to represent what we were looking at trying to do in the community organizing because there was, I think there’s a dimension to it which is dealing with this transformation of people.

Moses in Mississippi

I first learned of Bob Moses when reading *Parting the Waters*, the opening volume of Taylor Branch’s definitive biography of Dr. Martin Luther King. Here is Branch’s description of Moses’s encounter with a group of racists who attempted to prevent Moses from registering two local men to vote:

The next morning . . . the three of them found the sidewalk near the courthouse blocked by three young white men . . . There was very little talk. Caston asked Moses where he was going. To the registrar’s office, Moses replied. Caston said no he wasn’t and struck a quick, swiping blow to Moses’ forehead with the handle of his knife.

In a mystical discovery even more vivid than the pains shooting through his head, Moses felt himself separating from his body as he staggered on the sidewalk. He floated about ten feet up in the air so that he could watch the attack on himself comfortably. His fears became as remote as Caston’s grunts, and time slowed down so that he could hear Preacher Knox running away on the sidewalk before he saw Caston slapping and shaking him. In peaceful surrender, he saw Caston hit him again behind the right temple, saw himself sink to his knees, saw Caston drive his face to the pavement with a crushing blow to the top of the head . . .

His first thoughts, upon hearing the feet of his attackers depart, were that he could function in spite of his wounds and that it was urgently important to reach the courthouse ...

The county registrar reserved a practiced, well-what-have-we-got-here look for Negro customers, but it vanished in a gasp at the sight of Moses, whose bloody head and shirt combined with his serene, quiet voice to give him a presence as eerie as Banquo's ghost. The registrar gamely sought refuge in bursts of businesslike indifference, excessive politeness, and put-upon impatience, before all his bureaucratic poses collapsed under the weight of his nerves. He said he was closing the office and asked the three Negroes to leave.

The next day Moses drove back to the courthouse and swore out a complaint against Caston for criminal assault. The district attorney agreed to do so, although he warned Moses that "no one could guarantee Moses's life – or his own legal career – against the wrath of the local white people." After Moses and the two men testified the next day, over one hundred white men gathered outside the courthouse, several shots were fired, and Moses and his witnesses got a police escort to the county line. The next day they read that Caston had been acquitted.

Post-Mississippi Crusades

Bob Moses never stopped organizing or emphasizing the importance of grassroots leadership. In part his reason for leaving Mississippi was his feeling that his role had become "too strong, too central, so that people who did not need to, began to lean on me, to use me as a crutch."

He became active in the antiwar movement and spoke out against the Vietnam Conflict in 1965 (two years before MLK's famous Riverside Speech). Not long afterward, and despite being 31 years old at a time the [cutoff](#) for the draft was 26, he was drafted. He and his wife moved to Tanzania, where he taught math and lived in exile from 1969 to 1976. After the Carter amnesty he returned to the United States and completed his doctorate at Harvard and began teaching math in public school in Cambridge after learning from his daughter that the school was not offering algebra.

This led to his next civil rights crusade, "against the inequalities baked into the public education system." In 1982, he launched "[The Algebra Project](#)," using funding from a MacArthur "Genius" Grant:

"Education is still basically Jim Crow as far as the kids who are in the bottom economic strata of the country," Moses told [NPR](#) in 2013. "No one knows about them, no one cares about them."

After its launch, The Algebra Project expanded nationwide into hundreds of schools. It has helped to provide these forgotten kids with the tools to avoid a lifetime of "low-wage, low-skill work on the second tier of an Information Age economy," as NPR reported in a [podcast](#) in 2013.

When he died, this gentle giant was still listening to those left behind and ignored, still working to better their lives. As Charles Payne writes in the final paragraph of his obituary in *The Nation*, Moses and his wife, Janet had recently "been building a national project to create local

organizations committed to addressing manifestations of the racial caste system in their schools.” More information on “Data For Better Schools” is available at <https://www.typp.org/dbs>

Payne ends the obituary with the message left by the Wobblies’ legendary organizer and songwriter Joe Hill: “*don’t mourn, organize.*” As we face the potential loss of the Senate and House and the prospective reelection of Ron DeSantis next year, we would do well to listen . . . and act.