

Below: Professional enthusiasm earned a young Cecil Williams enviable photo access to presidential candidate Senator John F. Kennedy, seen here in 1962 at the Hotel Roosevelt press conference following his announced bid for the White House. Right: Surrounded by the care of experienced generations, this wondering youth epitomizes the wanting and waiting of the civil rights era in this 1963 Williams photo.



# Portraits of Civil Rights

By Anastasia Howard



The 1963 Orangeburg Freedom Movement consisted of a small South Carolina community's nonviolent protests, such as this prayer on the green, to resolve inconsistencies between black and white rights and privileges.

When the well of human emotions runs as deep as your soul, not even a thousand words can rescue you from the weight placed on your heart. The simplicity of one silent picture, however, can speak volumes, stirring feelings decades old. And in an instant begin the healing again. This is the nature of art. And it is the task assigned to the civil rights images by photo-journalist Cecil J. Williams. Where the indelible struggles of a divided South are portrayed as they were lived, in black and white.

Williams' work parallels the journeys of freedom marchers, civil rights crusaders, school teachers and church leaders. Over the years his work not only came to form a pictorial history of the South, but to also call a nation's attention to the landscape of a movement toward equality.

Though young, his age was no barrier to his enviable access to Thurgood Marshall, NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund director-counsel. There you found Williams recording the journey to school desegregation that began with South Carolina's *Briggs vs. Elliott* and concluded

and become part of the permanent collection at the I.P. Stanback Museum at South Carolina State University. A speaker at universities around the country, his notoriety continues to grow with each passing year. Upon the opening of Claflin University's new student center in his hometown of Orangeburg, and upon the completion of the new Federal Court building in Columbia, history and art enthusiasts will see even more of his collection prominently celebrated.

Though his book *Freedom and Justice* celebrates the spirit of America's civil

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— Cecil Williams



His photographs, which capture the contrasts of the 1940s through 1960s, are both historical and provokingly symbolic; drawing you in to contemplate a chapter in American history that preceded and embodied a time we know as the Civil Rights Era.

"Mine is a photographic journey through a world entirely shaped by race and color," says Williams, who was an eyewitness to events that affected the lives of millions.

A native of Orangeburg, SC, Williams has lived both in front of and behind the camera's lens during the decades that gave rise to the historical icons of Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He was all of 13 when hired to put faces on the children of school segregation and the courageous black and white individuals who struggled together to move a nation closer to unity. As a stringer for *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines, the *Amsterdam News* in New York, and the *Afro American* and *Pittsburgh Courier* newspapers,

at the Supreme Court with *Brown vs. the Board of Education*. Though he was among such journalism giants as Chet Huntley and David Brinkley, his confidence earned him numerous exclusive opportunities from John F. Kennedy himself during the 1960 presidential campaign and thereafter. Though lost for words just days after Dr. King's assassination, he found his image of strength in Coretta Scott King as she marched alongside protestors in the Charleston Hospital Workers Strike of 1969.

Clearly his youth, confidence and passion were at the root of his destiny to amass the largest collection of civil rights images ever photographed by one individual; more than 5,000. Through them he recorded the unsung and the heroes, quiet chapters of heroism, and the ultimate sacrifices of life.

Considered one of the foremost photography legends alive today, Williams has seen his work on the front page of *The New York Times*, the cover of *Jet Magazine*,

rights pioneers, Williams hopes his more recent custom Giclée pigmented prints will help future generations to see into the heart of a revolution. The series of re-touched black and white images taken from his photographic journey are stylized through computer graphic techniques and set against flowing patriotic themes. It is a modernizing that he hopes will bridge the historical significance of his images with the sentiments of unity increasingly needed in America today.

"We all learn from the stories we hear and see," he says. "Hopefully my images will inspire a new generation to never forget and to forever seek out racial harmony."

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Turn to page 143 in the "green pages" to find out more about the I.P. Stanback Museum and Planetarium.