

James Forman Passes

Written by Robert ID703

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James Forman, a civil rights pioneer who helped inspire young people in the 1960s as a leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, has died of colon cancer, his son said Tuesday. Forman was 76.

He died Monday night at a hospice in Washington, where he lived for several years. Forman's son, Chaka Esmond Fanon Forman, said his father had been fighting cancer since 1991 and was surrounded by friends and family members when he died.

"He went very peacefully - just stopped breathing," Forman said in an interview with The Associated Press.

A Chicago native who grew up in Mississippi, Forman was a principal organizer of the 1963 March on Washington and the Freedom Rides in which blacks rode across the South to make sure buses were integrated as ordered by the courts.

In 1961, he joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and was elected its executive secretary one week later.

Although both the student group and Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference were fighting the same struggle, there was friendly competition. Often the students organized demonstrations and took positions that went beyond those advocated by King.

For example, when Mississippi tried to send an all-white delegation to the 1964 Democratic convention, Forman was far more outspoken than King about the compromise that allowed two at-large votes for black delegates. SNCC helped organize a protest in Atlantic City, N.J., where the convention was held that renominated President Johnson.

"They always thought King got all the publicity and they did most of the suffering, that they were the shock troops," said Taylor Branch, who has written two books on the civil rights movement. "There was tension and resentment and cooperation all at once."

But John Lewis, a congressman who was the coordinating committee's chairman when Forman was its executive secretary, said Forman's role was critical in convincing students they had a stake in the fight for equality and justice.

"He was the glue that held the young people together during the most abrupt time of the civil rights movement," said Lewis, D-Ga. "He was somewhat older than many of the young people who became part of the movement but was thoughtful, had great organizing skills and was a good manager."

Lewis credits Forman for persuading the group to purchase its own office building, printing press and research department that helped document the struggle. Rather than wait for King to

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arrive in a town and deliver a motivational speech, Forman tried to develop leadership among students, including the appointment of field secretaries to recruit young activists across the South.

"The chairman was kind of the public face and spokesperson while the executive secretary was always the guy running the organization behind the scenes, making things happen," Branch said. "To the people scattered down in Mississippi going to jail for tiny projects, he was the one who made sure somebody would get you out."

In 1969, Forman became one of the first major black leaders to demand slavery reparations. His "Black Manifesto," delivered at a church in New York, sought \$500 million from white churches for America's role in the Atlantic slave trade.

He remained active in promoting the cause of blacks throughout his career, including traveling to Africa and Europe on behalf of the Black Panther Party, planning a new March on Washington in 1982 and lobbying against the appointment of Supreme Court nominee Robert Bork and the presidential campaign of former Ku Klux Klan grand wizard David Duke.

Dorie Ladner, a longtime friend and neighbor for several years in Washington, said Forman left his mark on the civil rights movement.

"He was very intelligent, a learned man with zeal for justice and equality," Ladner said. "He was fearless."

[Source](#)