

# Martha Bergmark (1966, MS)

BY CRAIG COLLINS

LIKE MOST OF THE RESIDENTS OF JACKSON, MISS., Martha Bergmark can never forget June 12, 1963 – the day civil rights leader Medgar Evers was gunned down in his driveway. At the time, Bergmark was 14 years old. “That was just a few miles from our family home,” she recalled. “Before that, I was certainly aware of the burgeoning civil rights movement in my home state. My parents were already involved. But I’d have to say if there was a first moment, when I had to ask myself: ‘Where do I stand, and what am I willing to risk?’ that was probably it.”



Bergmark spent most of her remaining school years in Jackson living what she called a “split life” – lying low, hanging out with all the other white teenagers at Murrah High School, while working for the civil rights movement in the after-hours – until her senior year, when Murrah’s first African-American students were enrolled. She helped to orient the new students, both before and after their arrival at the school. “So I had an interesting senior year,” she said, “kind of a tough senior year. It was the first time I really experienced ostracism – and some worse than that – because of taking a stand.”

Learning that she had been selected as a Presidential Scholar, she said, was “just a very sweet revenge, almost. It was a validation that there was a world out there that thought about things differently, maybe, than the white power structure in Jackson, Miss., did. It was on my senior class day that the telegram came from the

White House, inviting me to be there. So that was a very exciting moment.”

Like many of the program’s early honorees, Bergmark was astounded by the award ceremony staged by President Lyndon B. Johnson. “They really brought out the top political stars,” she said. “I sat next to Thurgood Marshall, if you can imagine that, on the White House lawn for the award ceremony itself. We met all kinds of interesting people just wandering around the Rose Garden.” Her father took photos of some of them, including television journalist John Chancellor, playwright Edward Albee, and Sargent Shriver, special assistant to the President. A troupe of actors performed a scene from *Man of La Mancha*, which was then the talk of Broadway, on the lawn.

“The two mementos I have of that time,” she said, “are that telegram and a photograph. After the White House event, an envelope arrived in our mailbox, all wadded up. It was a big envelope, and it

said very clearly on it: ‘Photos, Do Not Bend.’ But it was from the White House. And the mailman had taken the trouble to crumple it up in our mailbox. It was a photograph of me getting the medal from Lyndon Johnson, a big 8-by-10 picture, slightly creased. So my family got a good chuckle out of the fact that the postman – Who knows? Maybe it was completely unintentional – but we could not help but think this was our postman’s way of saying he didn’t care a hoot about delivering the White House envelope to our house.”

When she left Jackson to attend Oberlin College in Ohio, Bergmark believed she would never return to Mississippi, but she had already changed her mind before receiving her law degree from the University of Michigan. “In the North,” she said, “if you were a white female with a Southern accent, you kind of had to prove you weren’t stupid.” She practiced civil rights law in Hattiesburg, Miss., for 14 years before moving to Washington to advocate for justice for racial and ethnic minorities. During the Clinton administration, she served as president of the Legal Services Corporation, the federal government’s largest funder of civil legal aid for low-income Americans.

In 2003, Bergmark returned to Jackson to establish the Mississippi Center for Justice, an organization focused on providing access to justice for low-income Mississippians. In founding the center, she said, she hoped to revive some of the state’s capacity to fund legal aid for low-income and civil rights-related problems – funding that had tended to fluctuate dramatically in public budgets.

“What is different about the Mississippi Center for Justice,” she said, “and the reason I think it has gained a measure of national recognition, is that we are using something of a different model. It’s a truly multifaceted approach to addressing the systemic issues of races and poverty that still afflict Mississippi. Yes, we do litigation. We use our standard legal tools, but we are also very much in the policy arena. We’re very much in the media arena, and we have organizers on staff. So it’s a much more multifaceted approach than, I think, some previous models of civil legal aid.”