

Morris Dees: more than a great lawyer

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By DOUGLAS K. SHEFF



I recently had the privilege of introducing keynote speaker Morris Dees at the Massachusetts Bar Association's annual gala dinner. He reminded us all not only what can be accomplished through the law, but how the best of us within the profession are willing to sacrifice for the good of others.

Dees, 74, made me proud to be a lawyer. Consider the following.

In the 1950s, the South was not a terribly friendly place for minorities. Dees' father, however, provided him with a rare and commendable example to the contrary. He was a tenant farmer and worked alongside black workers daily. He would invite them into his home to sit at his table, unheard of in the South at the time. The elder Dees not only planted seeds in the earth but in his son as well.

Dees received his law degree in 1960 from the University of Alabama but didn't focus much on the law just yet. Instead, he developed a direct-mail business that reached \$15 million in sales – and that was in the '60s!

Most would have continued along in life wealthy, happy and content. But not Dees. His past resurfaced with the rise of the civil rights movement. Federal legislation was passed but largely ignored in the South. Intolerance led to countless injustices and acts of violence.

Dees was deeply affected when a bomb went off in a Birmingham Baptist church, killing four little girls. His requests for help were ignored, and he was, himself, ostracized from his community.

In 1968, the great Martin Luther King Jr. was murdered.

The following year Dees sold his business to the Times-Mirror Corp. and dedicated himself to the civil rights cause. He reflected: "All the things in my life that had brought me to this point, all

the pulls and tugs of my conscience, found a singular peace. It didn't matter what my neighbors would think, or the judges, the bankers, or even my relatives."

His early cases included one that actually integrated the all-white Montgomery YMCA. Imagine that in the '60s.

In 1971, Dees co-founded the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, a resource that would fuel an ambitious civil rights caseload. The center was heralded as an effective tool against hate and racism.

But while Dees was making inroads in the fair treatment of all people at the center, King's assassination in concert with the stress created by a bad economy once again unleashed a sudden rise in the establishment of hate groups.

Now, individual acts of intolerance gave way to a new brand of group racism and violence. For some time these groups were able to incite countless unspeakable acts without direct involvement or legal culpability. Dees realized he would need a new strategy. He used an innovative approach to the law to hit them in the pocketbook and used civil judgments to seize assets.

His victories include a \$7 million judgment on behalf of the mother of Michael Donald, a young black man lynched by the Klan in Mobile, Ala.; a \$6 million judgment that bankrupted the Aryan Nations; a \$12.5 million jury verdict against the California-based White Aryan Resistance for the death of a black student; and a \$26 million verdict against the Carolina Klan for burning black churches.

By 1980, the Southern Poverty Law Center established "Klan Watch," a proactive program to monitor dangerous Klan activities.

But the '90s would introduce a new concern.

Ignorance and hate are portable, and if those who promote them could no longer succeed through the Klan, they would attempt to do so through other groups – terrorist groups. Again, Dees had to adjust.

Today the SPLC monitors hate groups and tracks extremist activity throughout the country. It provides constant updates to law enforcement and the media. "Klan Watch" has evolved into what is now called the "Intelligence Project," which monitors the broader and ever-expanding scope of hateful and violent activity that threaten the lives of each of us every day.

But Dees has never been able to enjoy his successes without the constant fear of reprisal. No less than 30 individuals have gone to prison for plotting to kill Dees or attack the Southern Poverty Law Center.

While we lawyers and judges sometimes and justifiably complain about being the target of unfair criticism, Dees has lived most of his life the target of a gunman's bullet.

Again, Dees didn't have to live like that or continue in his quest for all those years. But he has always known that the struggle is never over, that the stakes simply get higher. And just as those who ignore history are destined to repeat it, Dees knows that we must all remain ever vigilant.

If economic downturn is indeed a precursor to the unthinkable threats posed by the groups Dees has fought all his life, how can we ignore today's economic collapse?

Dees is more than a great lawyer. He is a constant reminder of necessary sacrifice in the name of good and courage in the face of evil.

These are challenging times, but it's a bit easier to take when you know there are people like Dees out there doing the right thing, even if it means fighting an uphill battle.

The next time you're frustrated with a case, your office or life in general, I suggest you think of Dees and be grateful to be part of our truly noble profession.

Douglas K. Sheff is a Boston lawyer and vice president of the Massachusetts Bar Association.