Two women, joined by murder

Forty years ago this summer, racist killers took the lives of three civil rights workers in Mississippi. Now the daughter of one of the murdered men meets, for the first time, a woman who grew up with the conspirators. A story of death and forgiveness, by Sheila Weller

Angela Lewis and Donna Ladd at the spot where Chaney, Schwerner and Goodman were killed

On a muggy June night in 1964, two tiny girls lay asleep in their separate beds, 38 miles apart, while a blue station wagon sped down the road between their Mississippi communities. One child, an infant named Angela, was black; the other, a two-year-old named Donna, was white. Their strange, terrible connection: Angela's father, James Chaney, 21, was at the wheel of the car, while some of the men Donna trusted most in the world were plotting to kill him.

By the next morning, Chaney, along with his passengers, fellow civil rights workers Mickey Schwerner, 24, and Andrew Goodman, 20, were dead. They'd been shot, execution style, by a group of whites who were incensed that the three were conducting a voter registration drive among local black residents. Chaney, the only African American of the trio, was the last to die. "Well, you didn't leave me nothing but a nigger," one of the shooters, James Jordan, complained to his companions after he'd pulled the trigger. The three bodies, buried under an earthen dam on private farmland, lay undiscovered for 44 days.

That violent night left a legacy that would echo for decades to come. Prompted partly by national outrage over the murders, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which outlawed racial discrimination at the polls. There was a personal legacy, too. While all three men had siblings or wives, Chaney was the only one to leave behind a child, the newborn Angela. He'd never laid eyes on her, having been out of town at a civil rights workshop when his 19-year-old girlfriend, Mary McCoy, gave birth. Just before he slid into the driver's seat on that fatal June morning, Chaney told his mother he was looking forward to the next day, when he'd finally meet his baby daughter and bring her a present.

Today, Angela Lewis and Donna Ladd still live in Mississippi; until recently, neither knew of the other's existence. As they grew up, each wrestled in her own way with the repercussions of June 21, 1964. For Lewis, her life became a search for answers: How do I make sense of my father's murder? For Ladd, the issue was: How can I shed this hateful taint of violence and make up for what happened here?

As the fortieth anniversary of the Mississippi murders loomed, *Glamour* brought together these two women at the spot where the executions took place. They approached the day with trepidation and finished it with the understanding and resolution they'd long been seeking.

This is a story of how two women struggled with racism's complex toll—and how they transcended it.

A SECRET DAUGHTER

"Can you imagine what would have happened if the white people here knew that James Chaney had left a baby daughter?" says Angela McCoy Lewis today (Lewis is her married name). "They would have threatened my mother and me, maybe come after us."

Racists *did* come after other members of Chaney's family. Two months after the murders, the house next door to his was raked by shotgun blasts and Molotov cocktails (the shooters apparently had the wrong address), and death threats were sent to his grieving mother. The meaning was clear: No one else had better get any ideas about civil rights. Out of fear for her children's safety, Fannie Lee Chaney moved the rest of her family to New York City.

But Mary McCoy and her newborn, Angela, were protected by secrecy. Chaney and McCoy had told few people about their romance, mostly because they feared that Chaney's civil rights work would imperil anyone close to him. Chaney, though, had given little thought to his own safety. "James was a fearless young man," says David Dennis Sr., a civil rights attorney who worked with him in 1964. "He drove around the back roads of Neshoba County fast as a demon, visiting the local blacks and delivering voter registration leaflets—which they took as if they were hand grenades—even though he knew that there was a good chance he'd get killed doing it."

"We black kids learned: White people may act nice, but they can kill you."
—ANGELA LEWIS

After Chaney's death, McCoy found work waitressing at a restaurant. To ward off danger, she simply refused to discuss Chaney with anyone, including her daughter. When young Angela would ask her aunts about him, she'd get only a terse reply: "Your father was killed by the Klan." Even now, McCoy will not talk publicly about Chaney. "I make my living here," she has said to her daughter. "I rely on white people for my tips." Says Lewis, "She'll take that information with her to her grave."

Growing up in Meridian, Lewis lived in a housing project in a segregated neighborhood. "We almost never saw white people," she says. "I don't remember incidents of overt racism, but that's because my mother shielded me from them." Still, hints of the violent outer world would crop up. "Whenever someone in my family had to go to nearby Philadelphia [Mississippi], someone else would say: 'Philadelphia? That's *Klan* territory,'" says Lewis. "If a black boy went missing, my mother would say, 'He'll float up in a river a few weeks later.' The message we black children got was 'Be careful around white people. They may act nice, but they can kill you.'"

The warnings about the perils lurking just beyond her neighborhood, and the complete silence about her father, had a profound effect on Lewis. "I never got to learn who my father was," she says. "I felt abandoned by him and so powerless and afraid. Looking back now, I realize I couldn't allow myself to feel how sad and scared I was. So I put up a wall between myself and my emotions."

LIFE ON THE WHITE SIDE OF TOWN

The very people Lewis so feared—the white citizens of Philadelphia, Mississippi, in neighboring Neshoba County—were the ones Ladd felt most comfortable with. The daughter of uneducated sharecroppers, Ladd grew up amid a pervasive racism. "Kids called chocolate candy 'nigger toes,'" she recalls. "Everybody black was considered stupid, violent. Grown-ups would say: 'They want our kids to go to school with those monkeys.' You couldn't get away from those messages."

Despite all the talk of "white superiority" in her town, Ladd led a hardscrabble existence; in summers, even as a toddler, she helped her parents pick cotton for extra cash. "My father had a drinking problem and an untreated mental illness, which left the family in turmoil," she says. One step ahead of eviction notices, "we moved five times before I was seven" to extremely modest houses that lacked indoor plumbing, she says.

Because her home life was so chaotic, Ladd looked up to the grown-ups who seemed to be protectors and helpers. These included Sheriff Lawrence Rainey and his deputy, Cecil Price, who'd patrol the Neshoba County Fair "in that swaggering, in-charge way, with those big hats on their heads." Billy Wayne Posey, an outgoing man who worked at the Phillips 66 station, made getting gas a special occasion. "I was a daddy's girl," says Ladd, "and I'd stand up in his seat real close to him as we pulled in. I'd reach my arm around Daddy's neck to take the M&M's that Billy Wayne would hand me through the window." Then there was trucking company owner Olen Burrage; the Ladds would go to the Burrages' ranch house to play cards and listen to Dolly Parton and Porter Wagoner, Conway Twitty and Merle Haggard.

THIS MEMORIAL IS PRAYERFULLY
AND PROUDLY DEDICATED
TO THE MEMORY OF
JAMES CHANEY
ANDREW GOODMAN
MICHAEL SCHWERNER

A marker honors the victims.

"They were friendly," Ladd says of the people in her town. "They could even be nice to individual African Americans—as long as they stayed in 'their place.' But if a black person

DAN CHAVKIN; STYLIST: KEVIN LENNOX; HAIR AND MAKEUP: VICTORIA TRIGGS-JACKSON FOR FACTORY ARTISTS

crossed the line—say, used a 'whites' rest room at a gas station—he'd be chased out of town."

As a child, Ladd knew nothing about the murders. Even though the crimes had sparked headlines throughout the world, the white citizens of Neshoba County had simply buried the topic. But for blacks across the United States, the killings became a rallying point in the civil rights struggle. By June 1966, when there were still no indictments, Martin Luther King Jr. led a march to Philadelphia's courthouse. Katie Mae Ladd decided that she and four-year-old Donna should attend.

Ladd believes that her mother's decision was part of an attempt to break from her own background. "We had that kind of relationship where she gave me permission to surpass her and lead us both to some new place," Ladd says. "She couldn't read and later I would read for her. She had never gone to school a day in her life, but she wanted me to go to college. It was 'forbidden' for her to believe in racial equality, but in her heart I know she believed that everyone was equal. She would even confide that forbidden thought to me. Maybe one day I could believe it more openly."

The father she lost

The murdered activist

Chaney planned to see his newborn, Angela, for the first time on June 22, 1964. He was killed hours before the visit.

The baby no one knew about

Few people were aware that Chaney left a child, Angela.

The march, however, was a snapshot of ugliness. Local whites menaced the marchers with hoes and pitchforks and ran a pickup truck into their path. A white boy turned a fire hose on an elderly black woman who was kneeling in prayer. Although Cecil Price tried to block King's way, the reverend pushed through the crowd and declared in his stentorian voice, "I believe in my heart that the murderers are somewhere around me at this moment." As the whites jeered, King continued: "I want them to know that we are not afraid. If they kill three of us they will have to kill all of us." As he and the marchers departed, whites pelted them with stones, bottles and firecrackers. "Momma told me later that I was just squeezing her hand and staring," says Ladd; she herself remembers nothing of that day.

AN UNEASY INTEGRATION

A small measure of justice finally came to Chaney, Schwerner and Goodman in October 1967, when a federal jury convicted seven men of conspiring in the killings. While there was disappointment in the black community that the guilty men had gotten off lightly (none received more than a 10-year sentence), the convictions did send a signal that things in Mississippi were at last starting to change.

By the time Lewis was old enough to attend school, even Meridian's classrooms had been integrated. It was a huge step forward for the community but a potentially frightening development for Lewis. "If I thought about the fact that I was going to school with classmates whose relatives may have killed my father, it would have been too threatening," she says. Instead, she developed a stoicism that, by the time she was in high school, had turned her into a virtual wall of denial, at least where her father was concerned. "During Black History Month, when my father's name would come up in class discussions, I would sit frozen. I didn't tell anyone he was my father. I was a teenager. I just wanted to fit in. I didn't want to answer questions about him. Besides, what answers did I have to give?" When she saw Chaney's picture in the school library, "I might as well have been looking at a stranger. That's how numb I had become."

Lewis eventually became comfortable enough in school to make friends with white students like the beautiful, blond Susan Akin. "We were in band together. She played flute; I played clarinet. She wrote in my yearbook: 'I can't wait for summer, to be in the sun and eat pizza.' We talked about girl things, like losing weight." Only years later, when Akin was crowned Miss America 1986, did Lewis learn, along with the rest of the world, that Akin's grandfather had been one of the men tried and acquitted in the conspiracy to kill Chaney, Schwerner and Goodman.

THE UGLY TRUTH

During those incredible years of upheaval, while Lewis was stubbornly denying her past, Ladd was discovering the truth about hers.

Her awakening had begun one evening when she was about seven and watching television after dinner. Suddenly, she was riveted by a movie about a lynching. "I have an image of a loud mob hanging a black man from a tree while his house burned. It was the most horrible thing I'd ever seen. I just fell apart. I couldn't stop crying. Momma came running with a wet cloth. She washed my face and hugged me. I said, 'That was so mean! Did they do that because he was colored?' Momma said, 'Donna Kay, your heart's too big for your body!'"

That was the start of Ladd's effort to distance herself from the attitudes of her community. "I kept a journal, and I wrote, 'I don't believe in prejudice!' over and over in it." Whenever anyone in my family used the *n* word, I'd say, 'That's an ugly thing to say!'" Her father died when Ladd was eight, and Ladd got her mother to ban the racial slur completely from the house. As for the wider circle of adults, "If a relative talked about 'them' being on welfare and drinking too much, I'd say: 'What about you?' 'Cause we had plenty of both in my own family. The people I challenged would sometimes sneer, 'Well, aren't you just a little nigger lover.' My mother would respond, 'Donna's just...different.'"

Different, perhaps, but she still basked in the warmth of her small-town life, and still knew nothing of Chaney, Schwerner and

CHANEY: AP WIRE PHOTO

Goodman. Finally, when she was 14, Ladd started hearing talk about "the murders." A TV movie about the case was coming out, and many white Mississippians didn't want it broadcast in the state. "I asked my mother, 'What murders?'" says Ladd. "She looked ashamed and said, 'Some civil rights workers were killed. You were a baby.'"

Because her mother didn't remember all the details, Ladd went to the county library soon after to read the old news reports. "I asked the librarian for copies of *The Neshoba Democrat* from June 1964 on, and she looked like she was bracing herself. 'OK,' she said, 'here they are.'" Leafing through the yellowing papers, Ladd learned who the men she'd grown up with really were.

Friendly Cecil Price: The deputy sheriff had been found guilty of conspiracy in connection with the killings of the civil rights workers and had spent four years in prison.

Lawrence Rainey: The swaggering sheriff from the county fair had been tried and acquitted of conspiracy.

Billy Wayne Posey: The jovial Phillips 66 worker had been convicted of conspiracy and was sentenced to six years in jail.

Hospitable Olen Burrage: The bodies had been found buried on his property, but he had been acquitted.

There was more: Herman Tucker—father of two girls Ladd knew, a man she saw at school football games—had been accused of digging the ditch where the bodies were buried; he was acquitted. Her father's childhood buddy, Edgar Ray "Preacher" Killen—who delivered fiery church sermons—had been identified by at least two FBI witnesses as one of the leaders in the plot; his case had ended in mistrial because a juror said she "could never bear to convict a preacher." In all, 19 men were indicted and seven convicted.

The men she knew

Edgar "Preacher" Killen: His case ended in a mistrial.

Cecil Price: convicted in the conspiracy tied to the killings

Sheriff Lawrence Rainey: tried and acquitted of conspiracy

Pillars of a racist community

To Donna Ladd, here at age two, these family friends were warm, trustworthy.

Billy Wayne Posey: convicted in the conspiracy tied to the killings

(No one in the case was ever tried for murder, a charge that must be made at the state level. "This was Mississippi in the sixties; the state was simply not going to indict," says John Doar, the assistant attorney general under President Lyndon Johnson. Because of that hurdle, the federal government brought charges of "conspiracy to deprive citizens of constitutional rights.")

"I felt like I'd been kicked in the stomach," Ladd recalls. "Then I felt overwhelming disgust. I was shaken. And so angry: Here were these law-and-order people—everyone loved the death penalty—but there was hardly any punishment, and those convicted came back to live their lives like nothing happened."

She saw her town in a new and ugly light. "I hate Mississippi!!" she'd write in her journal. "I'd go around saying, 'People here are so mean! This place is so hypocritical!'" But she never asked these old family friends about their involvement, never questioned their children when she saw them at school. Instead, she compensated by being the most integrationist of all the white kids at Neshoba Central High. Just to stir things up, she and a black male friend even spread the word that they planned to go to the senior prom together, but the taboo against interracial dating was so powerful that they never went through with their plan.

"I couldn't wait to leave Neshoba County, to get rid of its taint, to get away from the ugliness. To breathe," Ladd says. Her exit strategy was college—70 miles away at Mississippi State, on full scholarship. This would be a momentous leap: The farthest her parents had gotten in school was third grade.

"DID HE EVER CALL MY NAME?"

At the same time that Ladd was entering Mississippi State, Lewis finally began chipping away at her wall of silence. She had obtained her grandmother Chaney's number in New York, and one day she nervously dialed it. "I didn't want to intrude on her life, but I needed to talk to her," Lewis says. A woman answered the phone, and in a weary, cautious voice asked: "Who is this?" Replied Lewis: "This is Angela." There was a pause and then her grandmother said, "I've been looking for you for years." Says Lewis: "She loved me right away."

Eleven hundred miles apart, grandmother and granddaughter forged a bond, and during countless conversations, Lewis started to learn about her father. What she discovered buoyed her spirits. She heard about James Chaney's childhood, about how everyone called him J.E. (Earl was his middle name), about how, at 15, in Tennessee, he'd boarded a bus and brazenly seated himself in the white section—the youthful beginning of his short life's work. She learned, too, that at the time of his death Chaney was making plans to go to college and then law school.

When Mrs. Chaney announced that she was coming to Mississippi for a visit, her granddaughter was overjoyed, but on the day of their reunion, the stress of returning to Meridian showed clearly on the old woman's face. Says Lewis, "To Grandma, 1964 was like yesterday."

Soon, however, Lewis' life took a happy turn. When she was 21 and managing a restaurant in Meridian, she met a coworker, Charles Lewis, a former Miami Dolphin player who'd been sidelined by injuries. They fell in love and married in 1986, and their relationship gave Angela new strength. As she and Charles had children together (Angela also had a son from an earlier relationship) and moved toward career success—she becoming a pediatric nurse, he a police detective specializing in child abuse cases—she was able to confront her community's awful legacy. "I was indignant! How could they kill three young men and then go back and live their lives, with their wives and their children, as if nothing had happened?" she says. "My father's killers were cowards, pitiable cowards. Not one of them in that whole lynch mob had the guts to step up and say: 'Let's not do this. This is wrong.'" The

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MEN: AP WIRE PHOTO

(continued from page 154) frightened little girl had become a young woman formidable enough to look down on the men who had murdered her father.

None of this came easily, however. One day, Lewis' four-year-old daughter, Jamie, crawled over to Charles and said, "Daddy, Daddy!" Says Angela, "It all just got to me. I don't know why that particular moment did it, but I started to cry. I never had a father! I never had someone to love that way!"

She couldn't help but wonder if her father had cared for her at all. Questions she'd never dared ask her mother or grandmother tormented her. "Did my father love me?" she wondered. "Did he think about me that last week of his life? *Did he ever call my name?*"

"I knew that my father was killed 11 days after I was born," says Lewis, but she'd never been told what had kept him away. Without that knowledge, she felt confused—and angry. "Eleven whole days! And yet he had not come to see me."

At first Lewis was reluctant to meet Ladd

DAN CHAVKIN; STYLIST: KEVIN LENNOX; HAIR AND MAKEUP: VICTORIA TRIGGS-JACKSON FOR FACTORY ARTISTS

CRUSADING FOR CHANGE

In some ways, leaving home made things worse for Ladd. At Mississippi State, she found that the notoriety of her birthplace still clung to her, and that racism was still rampant. "You're from Neshoba County," her college boyfriend's uncle approvingly said. "That's where they bury their niggers under dams." After graduating, Ladd got out of the state as fast as she could and worked overtime to prove to herself that she was not a bigot.

She moved to Colorado to become an activist for liberal causes, then enrolled in Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, where she wrote her master's thesis on Chaney-Schwerner-Goodman, and then became a journalist in New York City. During a trip home, she examined the records of the now-defunct Mississippi Sovereignty Commission, a state authority that acted as a sort of secret police. "I wanted to find out if any of my relatives had ever committed a racist crime." She found only one Ladd, and she didn't recognize him as kin. Nonetheless, she says, "not having your name in that file didn't mean you didn't do anything bad in those days."

> *"I wanted to find out if my relatives had committed a racist crime."*
>
> —DONNA LADD

Then, in 2001, something sparked an epiphany for Ladd. Mississippi voters decided, 2 to 1, to keep the Confederate symbol on the state flag. Watching this stubbornness from afar, Ladd first became angry, and then felt filled with a mission. "I realized that if everyone who disagreed with the state left it, nothing would change," she says. "I decided to come home."

Settling in Jackson, she founded the *Jackson Free Press*, a progressive newsweekly with a multiracial staff and readership. Among its missions: truth-telling about the state's past, and racial reconciliation. Guiding the paper has given her great hope. "So many young people, including sons and daughters of very powerful Mississippi families, are volunteering to work here," she says. "They are hungry to know the truth and to change the state for the better."

A MEETING ON ROAD 284

"When *Glamour* asked to speak to me, and to meet Donna, and to be photographed with her at the spot that my father died, I didn't want to do it," Lewis says. Her father's brother Ben Chaney, who lives in New York City, encouraged her to agree. "My uncle is a very persuasive person," says Lewis, who also recognized an opportunity. "I decided I was finally going to ask the questions that I was always afraid to ask. This time I wouldn't worry about hurting feelings."

Shortly before the photo session, niece and uncle had a long, frank phone call, and Lewis forced out the words: "Why didn't my father come to see me in those 11 days?"

What she learned "rocked me," Lewis says. Chaney had been in Ohio the whole time, teaching civil rights volunteers how to peacefully resist the police. It wasn't that he didn't want to see her; he couldn't. He had returned to Meridian on the morning of June 21 and told his mother he was going to meet his baby. Then an emergency—Klan members had torched a black church—forced him to delay the visit. His murder made the delay permanent.

By the day of the photo shoot, Lewis was still reeling from this revelation as she drove from her home to meet Ladd. Waiting at the Holiday Inn Meridian, Ladd was "not exactly nervous, but feeling that this meeting was significant," she says. She had even planned to apologize to Lewis on behalf of the whites of Neshoba County. Yet as they shook hands in the hotel lobby, these two women felt too much alike, and talked too easily, for a formal apology to be necessary. Within minutes they discovered they both were vegetarians, practiced yoga and shared a sly, self-deprecating sense of humor.

At the hotel, Lewis was also introduced to Stanley Dearman, a retired editor of *The Neshoba Democrat* who is now an avowed antiracist. Lewis listened incredulously as Dearman and Ladd talked about how maddening it was that murder charges had never been filed against the men they believe killed Chaney. "It was important for me to hear white people voicing that outrage," Lewis says. "I'd never known there was that much concern for justice for my father in the white community."

Lewis also met David Dennis Sr., the civil rights attorney who had worked with Chaney. "He said, 'Angela, your father was a great man—and he would have been a wonderful father.'" Lewis was so shaken, she couldn't speak. She soon recovered her composure. "So! I didn't have to be angry at him for these 40 years!" she told Dennis. "Hearing those words gave me peace," she says now. "They changed everything."

Out on Road 284, Ladd and Lewis joined hands in a scrubby field, on the spot where Chaney, Schwerner and Goodman had died. Now it was Ladd who found herself profoundly moved, and vindicated in what she was trying to do. "Being there with Angela, it was proof that much had changed. It was like saying: 'Here we are, the present. Nobody can stop us anymore.'"

As for Lewis, "The moment was a start, for me to really know my father, and for all of us, blacks and whites, to move on to the future." Her odyssey, she believes, also offers a larger lesson: "As painful as it is, sometimes you have to confront the past to live life, not with bitterness, but with forgiveness and hope." ⓖ

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