

President's Corner



By Elizabeth M. McGeever, Esquire

Last February, as part of Black History Month, Theater N ran a documentary called *Home of the Brave*. The film is a moving story about Viola Liuzzo, the only white woman murdered in the civil rights movement. At the time of her death, Liuzzo and a young black civil rights volunteer, Leroy Morton, were driving to Montgomery, Alabama to pick up marchers who were returning to Selma after a voting rights march. A group of Ku Klux Klan members followed Liuzzo's car for twenty miles along Highway 80, then pulled along side it and fired into it. Liuzzo was killed instantly. Her passenger, Leroy Morton, escaped by pretending to be dead. It wasn't just a matter of being in the wrong place at the wrong time; it was a matter of a white woman being in the company of a black man.

The movie led me to a book about Liuzzo, *From Selma to Sorrow*, by Mary Stanton. The book confirmed that Liuzzo was, indeed, an improbable martyr of the civil rights movement. Born in California, Pennsylvania, Liuzzo grew up in Georgia and Tennessee during the Great Depression. She dropped out of high school, and after a failed first marriage, she married a union organizer for the Teamsters. At the time of her death in 1965, Liuzzo was a 39-year old mother of five living in Detroit.

While busy raising her children, Liuzzo found that she also had to nurture her own personal growth. In the spring of 1963, she enrolled as a part-time student at Wayne State University. As she studied philosophy, sociology and political

thought, she became increasingly interested in racial justice. As many people at the time, Liuzzo was deeply disturbed when she saw the news coverage of Bloody Sunday — March 7, 1965 — showing Alabama state troopers beating and tear gassing voting rights marchers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma. But unlike most who remained appalled at a distance, Liuzzo decided to do more. As she told her husband, she just could not stand around any longer without doing something to help.

A few days later, Liuzzo drove from Detroit to Alabama to join the civil rights protesters. The trip that she and her family thought would take a week ended up taking her life. On March 25, 1965, Liuzzo and twenty-five thousand other demonstrators traveled from Selma to Montgomery to petition Governor George Wallace to provide protection for blacks who were trying to register to vote. A few hours after the march ended, Liuzzo was dead.

Liuzzo's murder touched off its own controversy. Unfortunately, her courage and conviction were soon overshadowed as the media, people across the country and even the FBI transformed her from the victim of a vicious hate crime into a hated criminal. Among other things, she was accused of abandoning her family, using drugs, being a Communist. Some argued that she deserved what she got for leaving her family behind to join the civil rights movement. The FBI, under J. Edgar Hoover, became involved in the smear campaign because, as it later turned out, one of the Klansmen involved in the

killing was an FBI informant whom some say was the trigger man. Three of the Klansmen charged with her murder were acquitted in state court although they were later convicted on federal charges of conspiring to violate Liuzzo's civil rights and sentenced to ten-year jail terms.

Notwithstanding the unfounded personal attacks on Liuzzo, her death sparked widespread revulsion against the Ku Klux Klan, and it led to federal legislation. President Lyndon Johnson presented a bill to Congress to make civil rights murder a federal crime. The bill was enacted into law after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Liuzzo's death also led to increased support for passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which President Johnson signed in August 1965. The Act changed the course of politics in the South. After a federal examiner arrived in Selma, the percentage of registered voting age blacks rose from less than 10 percent to over 60 percent in two months.

Sadly, Liuzzo's story has largely been forgotten. I am not sure that history knows what to make of her. In an era when a woman's identity was derived primarily from her husband and family, Liuzzo asserted her independence. She went beyond the conventional role of wife and mother at a time when, to many, such behavior was unacceptable, even unforgivable. Fifty years later, however, I hope she can be viewed in a different light and as one of the many people in our country who did something extraordinary for civil rights and social justice. Their struggles were monumental and their stories should be remembered. ☞