

Traces of Elaine: An Unsung SCLC Legend!

By Alysia Burton Steele

“There are unsung heroes and Sheroes in the Civil Rights Movement and Elaine is one of them. A courageous photojournalist during a dangerous era, a spicy stand-her-ground woman in a field dominated by men.”

– Sue Ross, photographer

Elaine Tomlin, the only Black female staff photographer for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference during the 1960s, documented racial injustices throughout the country. She didn't walk arm-in-arm with SCLC President Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. or his successor Rev. Ralph Abernathy, but she was on the front lines like other countless foot soldiers – her weapon? Her camera!

Tomlin didn't leave papers in archives. Little is known about her outside the SCLC. Photographer Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, widow of tennis great Arthur Ashe, first acknowledged Tomlin in her 1993 book *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers*. I read her book one day, and a sentence caught my eye:

“Elaine Tomlin, known for her images of urban riots, rural poverty, and civil rights marchers, went on to become the official photographer for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference,” Moutoussamy-Ashe reported.

Scholars have written little about her, although Tomlin's 30-year career shows work published in numerous Black-owned newspapers and magazines.

SCLC colleague and former Georgia state legislator Tyrone Brooks, now chairing The Moore's Ford Movement, said people should know Tomlin helped elevate the Movement through her writing and photography.

“I want them to realize that Elaine Tomlin, in her own way, contributed through her talents, and her ingenuity, and her skills to a

Movement that helped change not only the South and America, but it changed the world,” he opined.

With the SCLC's own communications system, the noted civil rights organization told its own stories.

“We could print our own magazine and newspaper, and we had our own national and later international radio program, which was Martin Luther King, Jr. Speaks. I mean, we were first class, we were doing it,” Brooks explained. “We had it right there because, you see, one thing about King and Abernathy, they knew that the mainstream media was not going to project our stories accurately.”

On July 10, 1969, JET Magazine reported Abernathy supported union workers striking in Charleston, S.C. Over 400 people joined the march.

“Charged with inciting a riot, parading without a permit and disorderly conduct...Abernathy and Williams (Hosea Williams), knelt to pray, were picked up bodily by police and put in the paddy wagon,” they reported.

Tomlin was there photographing Dorothy Ann Richards, 18, beaten by two White state troopers – her face covered in blood. Troopers believed Richards participated in the march. They pummeled her head with blows. Tomlin created a five-photo sequence of the beating as Richards staggered to the police van. “Despite her protests of innocence, trooper's club her, using a burly knee to pin her neck on rough pavement,” Tomlin reported.

Friend Susan Ross, another revered Black woman photographer in Atlanta, met Tomlin in the 1980s while Ross worked for former Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young. With over 37 years of city government experi-

ence, Ross notes that Tomlin also contended with sexism at the SCLC. Times were different for women then, and they didn't always get credit for their work. "She would've had to deal with issues of police brutality within the Movement. She would've had to deal with issues of sexism because even though they respected your craft, you are just a woman," she sadly said.

Evelynn Newman, former press secretary for then-SCLC

President Rev. Joseph Lowery, met Tomlin in 1981. Tomlin told Newman she'd joined the SCLC when King led the organization.

"She was feisty. We used to clash. I think we both had sort of bossy personalities," she said. "So, of course, that's a conflict waiting to happen, but we got to know each other better, then settled down and became friends. I think she respected me, and I respected her."

"She had a laugh that would make me laugh. It was a robust laugh," Newman recalled.

The last time they talked in 1995, Newman said Tomlin was diagnosed with emphysema. Doctors couldn't do anything else, and she died that year.

"She didn't say she was calling me to tell me goodbye, but that's what it was. I knew it in my spirit," Newman recalled. "I knew that I wouldn't see or talk to her anymore, but she lived a good life. She had a lot of experiences. Being involved in something as important as the Civil Rights Movement was important to her. When you know you are contributing to change and helping im-



An SCLC march against polychlorinated biphenyl dumping in Warren County, NC in 1982, as seen in an Elaine Tomlin photo, SCLC records, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

prove lives, you can die with that."

"Elaine Tomlin hasn't gotten the attention she deserves as a chronicler of the Civil Rights Movement. Her photographs document the vital work of SCLC from the 1960s through the 1980s and show how the Movement grew and expanded to address issues that we're still grappling with today," said Sarah Quigley, head of collection processing at Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library at Emory University.

Thousands of Tomlin's priceless photographs were stolen from her Atlanta condominium in 1987. JET interviewed her. "It really hurts. They took my life's work," she said. "What good is that going to do to anyone?" Friends say Tomlin was devastated by the violation.

"It takes a particular kind of person to photograph demonstrations. You have to make sacrifices to do this work. It's important work. It has to be done," said Ross. "She was a trailblazer."

"She loved life. She enjoyed having fun. We played Bid Whist, a card game like Spades," Brooks said. He remembers her cooking – he loved her soul food, said her home was as meticulous as her work. She cared enough about her work that she installed a darkroom in her home.

"Elaine has been largely forgotten in her contributions," Ross said. "There are unsung heroes and She-roses in the Civil Rights Movement and Elaine is one of them. A courageous photojournalist during a dangerous era, a spicy stand-her-ground woman in a field dominated by men."

But Elaine isn't forgotten. I see her. When my Mother, Stella Duncan was diagnosed with cancer a year ago, and my husband, Bobby, was diagnosed two months later, I sometimes didn't know how to focus on my doctoral studies in History, focusing on Black women's labor during the Civil Rights Movement. My momma passionately and purposely pushed me to go to the library and find traces of Elaine; to perhaps also find myself. And in learning about her work, I believe Elaine kept me company. Even my momma wanted to know about this mysterious woman. Before mom died, she said she would be there watching me. She wanted me to learn everything I could about this talented storyteller. She told me, "We finish what we start in this family."

So, my quest is in finding Elaine, interviewing those who knew her – she deserves that recognition and respect – so the storytelling of her heroics is to be continued!

Alysia Burton Steele, associate professor of journalism at The University of Mississippi, is completing her Ph.D. in History, focusing on Black women's labor during the Civil Rights Movement. She hopes to center her dissertation on the SCLC and Tomlin. For those who remember Elaine, please contact her at shutter-burt@gmail.com.

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