



Making

BY

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SYBIL HAYDEL MORIAL'S EXPRESSION IS WISTFUL as she eases her gold BMW through the grand Parisian-style gates of New Orleans' City Park. "We just wanted to see what was *in* here." The 83-year-old widow of the city's first black mayor, Morial is telling the story, ever crisp in her mind, of how she and her lifelong friend, the civil rights leader Andrew Young, dared as children to pedal their bikes into the inner sanctum of this vast and verdant wonderland—a 1,300-acre expanse of spreading ash trees, live oaks, gazebo-studded lawns, and a lake, every inch of it then off limits to blacks. As she approaches the palatial New Orleans Museum of Art, Morial veers right and points.

SYBIL
MORIAL'S
MEMOIR
REMEMBERS
THE NEW
ORLEANS THAT
SHE HELPED TO
CHANGE

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BOSTONIA

SUMMER 2016

PHOTOGRAPH

BY

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History

“There. That’s as far as we got.” Here the pair was intercepted by police and escorted back to the street, feeling fortunate not to have landed in jail.

The author of a memoir titled *Witness to Change: From Jim Crow to Political Empowerment* (John F. Blair, 2015), with a foreword written by Young, Morial (SED’52;55), a retired educator and long-time community and civil rights activist, put pen to paper during her eight years of

thartic initially. She writes about her forming a black women’s voters group, and about journeying to Liberia for the inauguration of President William R. Tolbert, Jr. And she chronicles her late husband’s political struggles as the very legality of his mayoral campaign is challenged.

At the urging of friends and with a few creative writing courses under her belt, she refined those stories into a candid, absorbing book. “It is a book about

elegant bearing of someone who has led a public life, making the acquaintance of several sitting US presidents and speaking out for equality in and beyond this most unbuttoned, intimate, and racially complicated of Southern metropolises, where the colossal Ernest N. Morial Convention Center on the banks of the Mississippi bears the name of her late husband. A longtime member of the board of the Louis “Satchmo” Armstrong Summer Jazz Camp and a founder of the Amistad Research Center in New Orleans, Morial was a creator of *Symphony in Black*, a five-year project to bring in black musicians and conductors to attract black audiences to the New Orleans Symphony.

Her face retains the wary intensity of her book’s cover photo, salvaged from a moldy manila folder in an upstairs desk drawer. It was taken during her years at BU, where she transferred after two years at Xavier College and where she went on to earn a master’s in education. From the time she was a child growing up in an educated, upper-middle-class family, a family that gave their children the rich cultural life denied them publicly in the Jim

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post-Katrina exile living with her daughter in Baton Rouge. It was poetic justice—“a kind of vindication”—that moved Morial to choose the art museum as the venue for her recent book party, which filled its auditorium to overflowing. Today, going on three years back in her rebuilt, modern home overlooking Bayou St. John, she’s still sorting out her surviving possessions. “The house was under three feet of water and then it burned,” says Morial, who is the first to say she was one of the lucky ones. She keeps up a busy schedule with book events and nonprofit board meetings, but loves to sit in her yard catching a breeze as the canal waters flow calmly by, the bayou’s pre-Katrina wildlife replaced by tourists in rental kayaks.

“I thought we’d be gone three days, maybe three weeks,” she says. “All those years of photos and memorabilia are mostly gone.” The mother of five describes writing her stories, about growing up in the Seventh Ward in a bungalow built “by a freeborn man of color” and about her first long-distance train ride, when a curtain was drawn around the table where she and her sister were sitting “so the white people didn’t have to look at us,” as merely ca-

heroes, written by one,” says Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Harvard’s Alphonse Fletcher University Professor. And Donna Brazile, a television commentator and vice chair of the Democratic National Committee, reminds readers in her blurb on the book jacket that Morial was more than a “witness”—“This charming, gritty gentle-woman was on the front lines in challenging a segregated South.”

The petite Morial has the

The Morial family, in the backyard of their New Orleans home (from left): Monique, Julie, Dutch, Marc, Sybil, Cheri, and Jacques.



Crow South, her parents always assured her things would change. Morial hopes her book will help a new generation of both whites and blacks grasp how hard a road it was, and how high the stakes.

Becoming Part of the Change

With more consternation and bewilderment than anger, Morial, a former debutante and the daughter of a respected Creole surgeon, gives an intimate account of the Southern civil rights movement victories and setbacks, from school desegregation and the angry white mobs that followed, to the murders of Medgar Evers and Martin Luther King, Jr. (GRS'55, Hon.'59). Although the book is subtitled *From Jim Crow to Political Empowerment*, the struggles continue to unfold; even today in Morial's beloved N'awlins an ugly battle rages over the proposed removal of a prominent statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee.

After her debut, Morial and her sister sailed to Europe on SS *Roma* with about 800 other Catholic students. But her life-changing journey was the train north to begin her junior year at BU. It was a revelation. "In Boston, I discovered for myself a whole new world, where everything public was available to everyone," she writes. "My Southern guidebook on 'What a Negro Woman Can Do' began a process of revision. In 1950, I was alive in a whole new way." She could take her place in the audience to see the operas and hear the symphonies she was weaned on. Her Liberian roommate, Izetta Roberts (DGE'52), became a lifelong friend. At a party at the Negro Business and Professional Men's Club Hall, Morial met King, a BU doctoral student and an ordained minister. "He had a charming personality, and, more important, a car—a rarity in the 1950s." She recalls one of King's sermons as a guest preacher in a Boston-area church, where he called for equality for women with a pronouncement that "seemed to

shake the church benches."

In the wake of the US Supreme Court's landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* school desegregation ruling, Morial, then working as a public school teacher in the hospitable, but lily-white city of Newton, Mass., headed home to New Orleans, where her heart was. In Newton, where she was embraced and made lifelong friends, "I never felt inadequate," she says. "I could handle any subtle rejection. I grew up in the South and wasn't thin-skinned. And I remember there were parents who wanted their kids in my classroom. They wanted them to know a black person. And kids are colorblind. They loved me and I loved them.

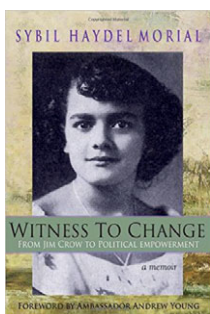
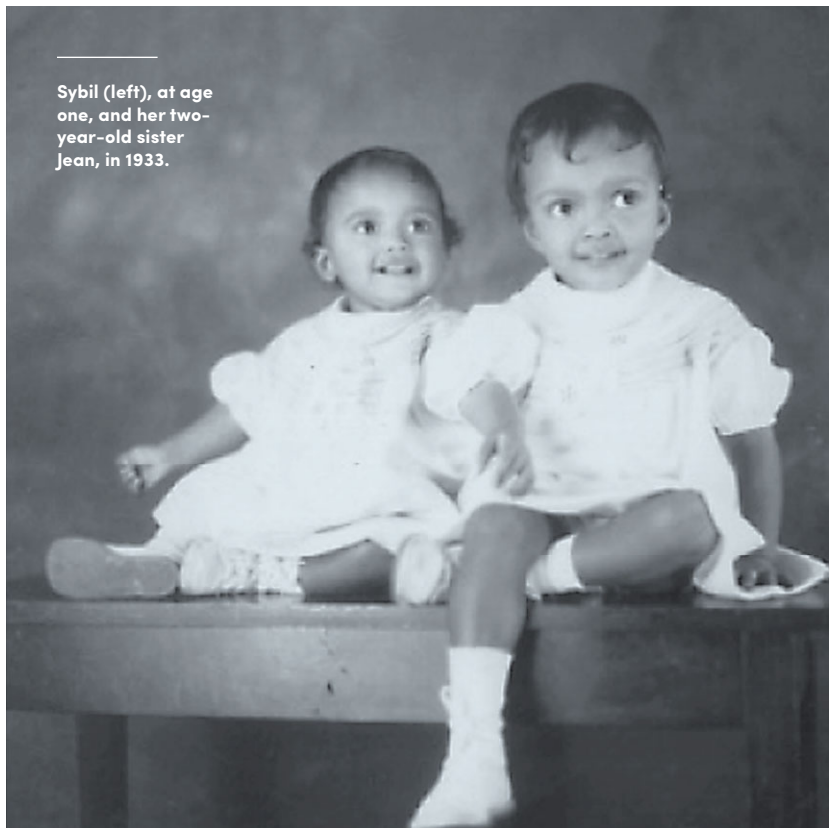
"So I took back South with me what life could be like, where I could go to all public places, where I didn't have to ride in the back of the bus. My friends and I, we loved the North and its freedoms, but we thought, change is coming, and we ventured to come back home. We wanted to be

part of the change, and we knew we couldn't go back to the past, which was too horrible."

Morial took a teaching job at Dunn Elementary School in the all-black Desire Housing Project. And she fell in love with Ernest "Dutch" Morial, a rising lawyer fighting to dismantle segregation. Their paths had crossed before, but the spark was ignited at a meeting of a black book club formed after Morial and a few of her friends discovered they "didn't have appropriate pigmentation" to join the Great Books Club at the New Orleans Public Library.

Dutch was a trailblazer, undeterred by racial barriers. Before his two terms as mayor, he was the first black to serve in the state legislature since Reconstruction and the first black juvenile court judge in Louisiana. Dismissed by the media as a lightweight spoiler candidate, Dutch was elected the city's first black mayor in 1977. "He had to win considerable white votes and nobody thought it

Sybil (left), at age one, and her two-year-old sister Jean, in 1933.



ONLINE:

Read an excerpt from *Sybil Haydel Morial's* book, *Witness to Change*, at bu.edu/bostonia.

was possible,” Morial recalls. He won with 95 percent of the black vote and 20 percent of the white vote. Throughout his high-profile legal and political career, the family grew accustomed to being in the spotlight, for better and for worse. It was under Dutch’s watch as president of the New Orleans chapter of the NAACP that the dividing screens came off the buses once and for all, and traditionally segregated institutions like public libraries became open to all. But it all played out against an angry racist backlash. Their children—three daughters and two sons—were threatened by white supremacists. “It was the scariest time,” Morial says. “But changing course was never an option.”

Dutch died suddenly at 60 of an asthma attack, and after the funeral mass a traditional second-line parade wended its way through Jackson Square with favorite NOLA son Wynton Marsalis (Hon.’92) blowing his trumpet. Dutch left a powerful legacy. The Morials’ son Marc, now president of the National Urban League, also served two terms as mayor, from 1994 to 2002, and among their other four children are a judge, a physician, and a Washington, D.C.-based civil rights activist.

Mobilizing Voter Registration

Morial’s many role models include her friend Young (who has served as a congressman from Georgia’s fifth Congressional district, the US ambassador to the United Nations, and mayor of Atlanta), King, and W.E.B. Dubois. But her first and most enduring role model was her father, a surgeon who studied medicine at the all-black Howard University. “He was a perfect gentleman, almost courtly,” she says. “He spoke his

He had a famously confrontational and abrasive personality and was often accused by critics of being pompous, arrogant, vindictive, and ruthless toward his political opponents. What is obvious so many years later is the inherent racism of the double standard Dutch was held to. He was confident and determined, says Morial. “He was fearless.” It took both kinds—her father’s gentle bedside manner and Dutch’s gloves-off outspoken-

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mind, but never in an offensive way. There needed to be more people like that.” She writes that in the days when a movable barrier separated blacks from whites on the public bus, a driver moved the screen behind her light-skinned father when he took a seat at the rear of the bus. By his polite firmness that he belonged on the black side, her father made a mockery of the rule. That was his style. Dutch, by contrast, was “the direct opposite,” says his widow. He was a divisive mayor.

ness—to make things happen, she says.

In 1961, when Morial was involved in a community group of young mothers devoted to charitable causes, there was a point when the women agreed “that we were benched on the sidelines while the Civil Rights movement was playing out in front of our eyes,” she writes. Rejected from the League of Women Voters because of her race, she helped mobilize voter registration drives in heavily black communities. The women called themselves the Louisiana League of Good Government, and incorporated in 1963 with a commitment to be nonpartisan and racially integrated. The project went on until the passage of the US Voting Rights Act in 1965, but Morial’s activism would continue in many forms, from political campaigns to challenging political strictures on public school teachers.

Morial is “saddened by the racial attitudes that exist today.” On some levels, she says, blacks are fighting the same battles they did in Dutch’s day. “We have a history of police brutality—my husband faced that as a legislator and head of the NAACP—and it was white cops against black people, and that’s resurfacing.” Blacks continue to face overt as well as

Morial with President Barack Obama and her son Marc Morial.



subtle discrimination, and “we have to talk about it,” she says.

Years ago, on a trip to South Africa, Morial heard Nelson Mandela and former president F. W. de Klerk speak and was inspired by their shared message: “If we had not come together we would both have lost.” She often muses about the United States having its own truth and reconciliation commission, saying that “we can’t just let these divisions fester.” She has had many frank discussions with close white friends, but “even some of my white friends don’t really get it, what it was like for us,” she says.

Her mother was an opera lover, Morial writes in her memoir, who could see live performances only by craning her neck after climbing rickety stairs to the “colored” balcony. Her father was excluded from medical conferences. And even when Morial returned South after desegregation and was accepted in a doctoral program at Tulane University, a young admissions administrator told her that as a black woman she could not stay in the program. Attending a city event many decades later as the city’s first lady, she saw that same man and confronted him. “I said, ‘Do you remember me?’ And he turned white as a ghost.”

Morial had always known that she descended from Louisiana slaves, but it wasn’t until she was 50 that she pieced together the story of her ancestry. She traveled to Senegal, the origin of about 60 percent of the Africans deported to Antebellum Louisiana, “and soon she understood the value conveyed by the Wolof saying: *Xam sa bopp mo gën ñu la koy wax* (You better know yourself, don’t allow others to define you),” says her friend Ibrahima Seck, author of *Bouki Fait Gombo: A History of the Slave Community of Habitation Haydel*, now the Whitney Plantation, where he is director of research. From finding out about her family’s African roots she was able to empathize with their enslavement,



Morial and friends gathered for a master’s graduation party at BU in 1953. Seated (in front, at left) is Martin Luther King, Jr. (GRS’55, Hon.’59). Morial is standing behind him.

Seck says, and her ancestry is a powerful driving force in Morial’s life. The Haydels, Morial learned, were all descendants of a mulatto slave named Victor, who was fathered by Antoine Haydel, of the family that owned the Whitney Plantation. Freed at age 28, he bought land and had eight sons. They bought land, and had many sons and daughters among them. “One was my grandmother.” Morial’s father was the oldest of nine siblings, all of whom went to college. So far, the names of more than 350 identified slaves, including Victor, are engraved on the plantation’s “Wall of Honor.” Visitors to the plantation are reminded of the cruel fact that slaves identified in legal records as a “mulatto” were, by definition, the result of slave owners impregnating their slaves, often through rape.

Morial has since met the “white Haydels,” including crossing paths with a Haydel cousin at the Whitney Plantation. The two embraced.

These days, although it has consumed much of her adult life, Morial has pulled away from politics. She is happiest lunching with women friends, at home whipping up a gumbo or callaloo

from fixings gathered at the farmers market, or watching her visiting grandchildren turn her serene, tidy home upside down. Having lived through many battles and losses, the news, at least close to home, is mostly encouraging.

“My city is a melding of cultures that thrives even since Katrina—we’ve got Jazz Fest, the French Quarter festival, blacks and whites and Hispanics mingling on the street, and respect for religions,” says Morial, who is Catholic. “On the surface everything is kind of good.”

She believes her book comes at an opportune time. She is considering adapting the memoir for children. She wonders, what have we, as a nation, learned? “You can change laws, but you can’t change hearts,” Morial says. “How do you do that?” There are so many people—even presidential candidates—who think in terms of “the other,” whether it’s immigrants, or Muslims. But “we can’t go back,” she says. “All my children are involved, and I’ll be involved as long as I can. I think hope is very important. It keeps the door open and it takes a lot to get through that door. That’s one thing the slaves didn’t have.”