

Mississippi Reporter Draws Inspiration From Faith

Investigative journalist Jerry Mitchell says he saw God's hand at work when 1960s murder cases were reopened

The reporter whose work has led to convictions in several civil rights killings said his main motivation is a biblical sense of justice.

Jerry Mitchell of the Jackson, Miss., Clarion-Ledger has been credited with reviving a string of civil rights-era cases, prompting lawmen and prosecutors to bring them back to trial.

Those trials have resulted in the conviction this year of Edgar Ray Killen in connection with the 1964 murders of civil rights workers Andrew Goodman, James Chaney and Michael Schwerner; the 1998 conviction of Sam Bowers for the 1966 killing of Vernon Dahmer; and the 1994 conviction of Byron de la Beckwith for the 1963 assassination of Medgar Evers.

"As a matter of faith I feel like God's hand has been involved in these cases," said Mitchell, 46, who has written a number of devotionals in addition to his award-winning newspaper articles.

The son of a former preacher, Mitchell was born in Missouri, raised in Texarkana, Texas, and was working as a reporter in Mississippi when he saw the movie Mississippi Burning in 1989. It opened his eyes to the South's legacy of racism.

That same year he got to look at files from Mississippi's

long-secret Sovereignty Commission that documented state complicity in racist acts. And he reported on the 25th anniversary of the Goodman-Chaney-Schwerner murders. "It was kind of a perfect storm that took place in 1989," Mitchell said.

He has no doubt that God brought it all together. "We don't begin to understand how God works. His ways are so far above ours. What we have to do is try to get in tune with His will," Mitchell said.

Some suspects in civil rights killings went to trial but got off with acquittals or hung juries even when guilt seemed apparent. Mitchell found evidence that the state secretly assisted in defending such suspects and that some lawmen lied under oath. Wanting to help redress such injustices, Mitchell began to investigate the Medgar Evers slaying in 1989. But there was little left to go on.

"There was no murder weapon, there was no transcript, no evidence, only a few pages in the court file," Mitchell said. "But [widow] Myrlie Evers prayed, and amazing things happened."

A few months after Mitchell began investigating, police ran across a bag of crime scene photos, including a fingerprint. Then Myrlie Evers found a transcript of the original trial. And prosecutor Bobby DeLaughter discovered the murder weapon among some old evidence. "If you wrote a novel and you put that in there, people would say, 'No, that would never happen,'" Mitchell marvels.

He doesn't mention his own dogged reporting-work that has been

lauded by Newsweek, American Journalism Review and a host of other publications, and has brought him several distinguished awards and a Pulitzer nomination. An actor even played his part in the movie Ghosts of Mississippi, which is based on the Evers case.

Seldom explored in articles about Mitchell are his religious beliefs. "The way I view myself is [as] a disciple of Jesus," he says simply.

His literary aspirations lean toward writing a discipleship manual and other Christian books. In recent years he's even felt drawn to the ministry.

Mitchell has caught flak, even been threatened, for his work. The main charge is that he's digging up a past that's better left alone.

Mitchell doesn't mind listening to—and answering—such critics. "As it says in the Psalms, God loves justice," he said. "Justice is part of the nature of God. He's a just God. He's a merciful God, yes, but He's a just God."

Especially chilling are people like Beckwith and Killen, who call themselves Christian ministers. Mitchell recalls the night Beckwith told him that if he wrote negatively about white Christians, either God would punish him or "several individuals will do it for Him."

Although Mitchell believes in the importance of securing justice, he also believes in the possibility of redemption. One of his favorite Psalms is chapter 51, "the idea of recognition of sin and being made white as snow," he said.

“Some people have called these atonement cases,” Mitchell said. “I view these trials not only as atonement but as kind of redemptive.”

Ernest Herndon