He Has Fought and Won Many Battles Against Racists and Racial Injustice

◊ Morris Dees ◊

NEA President’s Award

Morris Dees grew up poor and White in rural Alabama. His father was a tenant farmer. Dees attended segregated public schools. He was a good but sometimes erratic student. After graduating from the University of Alabama School of Law in 1960, Morris Dees opened a law office in Montgomery, Alabama.

In 1967, convinced he had to do something more meaningful with his life than make lots of money, Dees founded the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), and ever since then, the SPLC has been one of our nation’s most powerful advocates for racial justice and most determined foes of racist organizations.

Morris Dees is a risk-taker. Under his leadership, the SPLC launched a highly controversial, never-before-tried strategy of using civil lawsuits against racist organizations. The idea was to secure a court judgement for money damages against such organizations for wrongful acts, and then use the courts to seize the organization’s assets to pay the judgment.

SPLC lawyers used this legal strategy to hold the Klan accountable for the violent acts of its members. In 1981, Dees sued the Ku Klux Klan and won a $7 million judgement for the mother of Michael Donald, a young black man who was lynched in Mobile, Alabama. Payment of the judgment bankrupted the United Klans of America, and its national headquarters was sold to satisfy the judgment, with all proceeds going to the family of the deceased. In 2001 he secured a $6.5 million judgment against the Aryan Nations, which led to that hate group having to abandon its compound near Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, a community the Aryan Nation had terrorized.

Morris Dees has been the target of many death threats by racist extremists. As noted by writer Kurt Vonnegut: “No soldier has ever been braver, more honorable and more patriotic than Morris Dees.”

In recent years, the SPLC has broadened the scope of its work to include actions to protect the civil rights of immigrants, GLBTQ people, and Muslims. What’s more, the SPLC has created Teaching Tolerance, a project which provides resources to educators seeking to teach students about racism and how to deal with it. Many thousands of NEA members have used Teaching Tolerance’s materials.