Born and raised in Marion, Alabama, Coretta Scott received a B.A. in music and education from Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, and then went on to study concert singing at Boston’s New England Conservatory.

While in Boston, Coretta Scott met a young divinity student named Martin Luther King, Jr. He was studying for his doctorate in systematic theology at Boston University. She said later: “I married Martin Luther King, Jr. because I came to love him, but I also married the cause we both shared in and that commitment made it possible for me to continue after he was gone.”

Starting in her college days, Coretta Scott was an activist—“I had a very deep commitment to the struggle.” So when married Coretta Scott King and her husband, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. moved to Montgomery, Alabama, where he became the pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in 1954, she was ready to play an important part in all that unfolded.

In 1955, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus, sparking the Montgomery Bus Boycott, led by Dr. King and fully supported by his young activist wife. It was the turning point in the modern civil rights movement. Coretta Scott King balanced mothering and movement work, speaking before church, civic, college, and fraternal groups.

After her husband’s assassination in 1968, Mrs. King founded and devoted great energy to building the Atlanta-based Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Changes. And perhaps her greatest legacy after creating the King Center, Mrs. King spearheaded the massive educational and lobbying campaign to establish Dr. King’s birthday as a national holiday. And she was there when President Reagan signed the 1983 bill establishing Dr. Martin Luther King Day.

Of her days as an activist, Mrs. King once said: “I never thought of it as a sacrifice. I thought of it as a life-affirming commitment to justice.”