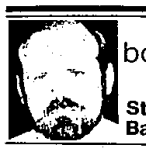
Tale of civil rights lawyer proves riveting



books

Steve Barnaby

"A Season of Justice," autobiography of Morris Dees, with Steve Fiffer (Charles Scribner's Sons, 355 pages, $24.95).

In these days of bottom-line ethics, we've come to expect new books extolling the virtues of macho entrepreneurial capitalists who are praised for doing nothing more than making millions of dollars.

Rare is it to find a new book about a real American hero, a man who took his self-made millions, invested it in fighting bigotry, injustice and murder and, at the same time, risked his life.

But Charles Scribner's Sons publishers deserve a pat on the back. The New York house has bucked the trend and is marketing the autobiography of civil rights lawyer Morris Dees. Entitled "A Season of Justice" and co-authored by Steve Fiffer, this is a tale well worth the read.

It's appeal is wide-ranging. Dees, whom you will recognize more from the cases he had handled rather than from his personal fame, is anything but the stereotypical East Coast lawyer who goes South to do good.

On the contrary, Dees, born in a small Alabama town of 400, is very much a product of his environment. Like many southern children, he spent time sweating it out in the cotton fields next to black field workers while, at the same time, living under the influence of his Uncle Lucien, who was "particularly ornery when it came to blacks."

DEES GREW up in the area of the country where it was acceptable for your best fishing buddy to be black but everything else — churches, schools, drinking fountains and the administration of justice — was separate and, as history has shown, very unequal.

But that is the charm of this book. No sanctimonious reformer do we find. Rather we share in a transformation of a southern American from farmer to lawyer to wealthy businessman and, finally, founder of the Southern Poverty Law Center.

We find a man who for years had to wrestle with his conscience before he took the step that helped to change the face of the American South.

One evening, while huddled in the Cincinnati airport, waiting out a snow storm, he picked up a copy of reform attorney Clarence Darrow's autobiography.

"Darrow undertook cases that made legal history in the fight for human dignity and justice for the powerless. I could relate to his dilemma of leaving the safe, accepted, business-as-usual world," Dees writes.

He saw himself as "a good lawyer wasting my time trying to make a few more million dollars." Taking his cue from the scriptural passage "to everything there is a season," he concluded that the rest of his life would be a season for justice.

AND WHAT a season it has been. Dees, along with his Law Center colleagues, has ravaged America's white racist organization while saving the lives of some black Americans who had been condemned to the death chamber.

Among the noted cases in which he has made a mark are:

- Saving the Tarboro Three, innocent black youths sentenced to death for allegedly raping a white woman.
- Defending Joan Little, a black inmate who faced execution for killing her white jailer in self-defense after he made sexual advances.
- Aiding the Vietnamese fishermen in Texas against harassment from the Ku Klux Klan.

Perhaps his biggest victory against the Klan was in a 1987 lawsuit he was able to prove a Klan conspiracy that led to the death of a black youth, Michael Donald.

The landmark case saw an all-white Alabama jury award $7 million to Michael's mother, Beulah Mae. The award bankrupted the United Klans of America and put white racists groups on notice that violence carried a heavy price.

BUT SUCH victories don't come without a price. He and his family have been assassination targets of the Klan and neo-Nazis. His home has been attacked; his Law Center burned.

But throughout, Dees remains amazingly compassionate toward his foes.

"These men and others like them are bright and completely dedicated. With a change of heart, they could build bonds between the races. Sadly, they hate so deeply that their works and deeds destroy all they touch. I cannot give up hope that they may someday change."

Morris Dees is a special man with an important message. He gives us hope that we all can conquer racism — even within ourselves.

Steve Barnaby is managing editor of the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers.

BILL HANSEN

Ceramicist Claudia Tann prepares some ceramic tree ornaments for the coming holidays.

Ceramic jewelry maker hones in on color, style

By Janice Tiger-Kramer
special writer

'What can I say? I'm interested in jewelry and accessories.'

— ceramicist Claudia Tann

When Claudia Tann worked in a fashionable retail clothing store, her customers often returned for wardrobe advice or a color consultation.

Today, Tann is a ceramic jewelry maker, and her customers come back, this time for more custom jewelry or simply to see what's cooking in the kiln.

"I've always been good with color and accessories. It's my forte," said Tann, who majored in jewelry and fiber art at the Center for Creative Studies in Detroit.

SHE REMEMBERED a buying trip to New York when she was working in retail. She craned her neck not to gaze at buildings, but to check out the accessories worn by fashionable East Coast businesswomen.

"What can I say? I'm interested in jewelry and accessories. I was continually looking around to see who was wearing what with which clothes."

This year, Tann, of Farmington Hills, makes her third appearance at the Ann Arbor Summer Art Fair, July 24-27, Main Street and Liberty.

She'll display free form pins, earrings and necklaces in a range of colors, styles and prices. Earrings are $28-30, pins $30-35 and necklaces start at $55.

TANN BEGAN designing and making ceramic jewelry full-time just six years ago.

Since she'd had a string of at-home businesses with her sister (personalized Santa letters and handmade baskets), the transition to self-employment was easy for the artist, who every year attends 25-30 juried shows in Michigan and Ohio.

"I admit going to shows at first was scary. I'd describe my early work as primitive, but I have evolved."

TODAY, THE artist rightfully calls her jewelry a work of art.

Her "spaghetti" necklace, for example, contains three highly glazed, twisted forms wrapped with thin, gold wire. The necklace is finished with a simple silk cord of variegated colors.

Most of her work involves an eight-step process, from slicing the wet clay to the second firing.

She recently finished a metal-working class taught in Franklin and now uses gold wire to accent the glazed surface of some earrings and pins.

Though the artist has become a skilled marketer, many of her designs are purely inspirational.

TAKE HER ceramic postcards, for example.

Since she has always loved receiving and sending postcards, Tann thought, "Why not make them in ceramic?"

The 4-by-6-inch ceramic "cards" (used for display only) include a colorful abstract design on the front and a "stamp" on the back.

And with a special pen used to write on ceramic, the buyer can inscribe a personal message. Ceramic cards sell for $28-52.

"I've always saved postcards. I even sent myself a postcard once from France."

ONE YEAR, the artist decided to make Christmas ornaments in non-traditional colors for gifts.

Since friends encouraged her to sell the globes, Tann took a few to an art show and sold out the first day. The pearlized globes are fired four times and include about 15 subtle colors. Ornaments sell for $15.

Tann also makes framed tiles to use as wallhangings, and may begin designing ceramic tiles to use in bathrooms and kitchens.

THE ARTIST describes her style as "painterly," with brush strokes visible like those of an oil or watercolor painting.

Perhaps her style reflects her love of watercolor and impressionistic art, or maybe the style just comes most naturally to her, Tann said.

"I'd like to try other styles and other mediums, but there isn't enough time for everything.

"For now, it's just a thrill to open the kiln. Sometimes you just don't know what you're going to get. It's such a surprise."

Claudia Tann will exhibit her ceramic jewelry in the Summer Art Fair in Booth 497 on Main Street.

Vintage clothing displayed in museum Fashion Room

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Leonard handwashed the clothes (about 30 pieces of clothing and 40 accessories) and began planning the display with museum curator Dick Carvell and committee member Barbara Butler.

But the final decision to open the Fashion Room came when the committee decided that vintage clothing would do more to "humanize" the old mansion than a library. Besides, the history room at the library's downtown branch down the street is open six days a week, but how often do local history buffs get to view turn-of-the-century clothing?

THE $2,000 project, which includes decorating and setting up the room to display the garments, was funded by contributions from the Quakertown Questers and the Farmington Winery.

Volunteer Kathleen Westlake of Farmington Hills made period draperies in an English garden print to match the wall coverings. Donations paid for used mannequins to display the clothes.

Members try to research the vintage clothing and accessories, but examining the clothes and the exquisite hand detail is exciting even if the history is unknown.

"It gives you a funny feeling to look at the clothes and realize that someone wore them to a wedding or graduation at the turn-of-the-century," said Leonard.

Detail on many garments includes intricate embroidery, beading, French knots, lace and accordion pleating.

Why are few of our clothes handmade today? Years ago when generations lived together, it was the grandmother's job to sew for the family. If grandmother wasn't there, a traveling dressmaker generally stayed at a home for a month to sew the family clothes, Leonard explains.

"The hand detail on the garments is gorgeous. These clothes are treasures," she said.

BESIDES GARMENTS, the collection includes 30 hats from the wardrobe of Irene Grillon of Farmington. The millinery, dating to 1940, is still in the original hat boxes from Himelhoch's, Hudson's, B. Siegel Co. and Winkelman's. The collection includes pill box hats, plumed, beaded and flower hats, tailored head wear, jeweled hats and decorative veils.

The only men's wear on display are two smoking jackets, a wool knee-length bathing suit and a lodge uniform that may have been worn by a chaplain. The name ML Botsford is monogrammed inside.

The display, an admirable collection for a local museum, is still growing through donations, said Carvell. Next June, the committee may set up a wedding display featuring a short wedding gown from 1926, a champaign-colored wedding dress from the 1920s with a beaded veil and starched shirts worn by men in the wedding party.

To see the Fashion Room, visit the museum from 1-5 p.m. Wednesdays and the first Sunday of each month. Admission is $1.

In concert

Lyric soprano Mary Callaghan Lynch (right) of Birmingham will be soloist for the "Broadway Blockbusters" Meadow Brook Music Festival concert in Rochester Hills at 8 p.m. Saturday. The popular actress/singer has had many leading roles with Michigan Opera Theatre, the Toledo Opera and the Dayton Opera. Charles Greenwell will conduct the Meadow Brook Festival Orchestra in a program featuring selections from "Phantom of the Opera" and "Les Miserables." For ticket information, call 377-2010.

Contest theme — remodeling

Quality Construction/INRECON, a Michigan-based national reconstruction company, is holding a remodel contest July 29 to Aug. 18.

Contestants just need to fill out the application, enclose a color picture of the room they wish to have remodeled and explain in 150 words why they want the room to be renovated.

The grand prize is worth up to $7,000 in remodeling costs, including labor and materials, for the chosen room.

Applications are available at any Church's Lumber Yards, including 31245 W. Eight Mile at Merriman in Livonia, or at Quality Construction's world headquarters, 7937 Schaefer, Dearborn, Mich., 48126. Completed applications must be postmarked by midnight Aug. 18 and sent to Quality Construction/IRECOM in Dearborn.

Founded in 1946, Quality Construction/IRECON has become one of the leading national contractors specializing in catastrophe reconstruction.

For more information, call 846-6735.