

A Transformed Heart and a Lifetime of Commitment

By Michael Wenger and Gail Christopher

“If we can build an educational system that . . . provides equal opportunities to all children, irrespective of skin color, religion, or ethnic origin, we will be on the path to equity and justice for all and to the healing that we all so desperately need.”

—[A Letter from William F. Winter](#), *Liberal Education*

Last Friday night, December 18, former Mississippi Governor William Winter, who served from 1980 to 1984, died. He was 97 years old.

If you're not from Mississippi, this may not mean much to you. But if you care about racial equity, justice, and healing, particularly in the area of a quality education, and if you value public officials who radiate courage, commitment, and integrity, it matters—a lot.

Governor Winter grew up on a farm in segregated Mississippi. But he refused to accept the racial hierarchy that defined life for both White and Black residents in the state at that time. During his time as governor, he appointed the first Black department heads and the first Black judges in the state since the end of Reconstruction. He had the statue of Theodore Bilbo, the vehemently segregationist former Senator from Mississippi, removed from its place of prominence on the grounds of the State Capitol, and he had the room in the governor's mansion that carried Bilbo's name renamed to honor famed Black opera singer and Mississippi native Leontyne Price, who, at the governor's invitation, sang at his inauguration—another first. Most importantly, against overwhelming odds, he led a successful, statewide campaign to enact the Mississippi Education Reform Act, described at the time by prominent syndicated columnist Carl Rowan as “the most important civil rights and economic development legislation of 1982.”

But his term as governor, impactful as it was, was only the beginning of his impact on racial equity and healing. In 1997, he was the driving force behind the creation of President Clinton's Initiative on Race, and he served as one of seven members of the President's Advisory Board on

Race, which was chaired by eminent historian Dr. John Hope Franklin. In that capacity, he traveled the country tirelessly in pursuit of racial justice and racial equity, focusing like a laser beam on the importance of equal educational opportunity. His work led to the creation of the Institute for Racial Reconciliation at the University of Mississippi, later named in his honor.

Under Governor Winter's leadership, the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation has, among many other things, led efforts to incorporate the truth about the civil rights movement into the public school curricula in the state, forged a biracial alliance in Neshoba County, Mississippi, that led to an official apology and the prosecution of the remaining living leader in the killing of three civil rights workers—James Chaney, Andy Goodman, and Mickey Schwerner—in the county in 1964, and created a [Summer Youth Institute](#) that “develops leadership, self-awareness, and community appreciation in students who desire to make an impact.”

Well into his nineties, he accepted an invitation to join with former Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick to become an honorary cochair of the nationwide Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation process (TRHT) launched by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in collaboration with several other foundations, and he journeyed from Mississippi to California to play a leading role in the conference that launched the TRHT effort. His work has led to the introduction by Rep. Barbara Lee (D-CA) of a [resolution](#) to create a United States Commission on Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation. The resolution now has 170 cosponsors, and a [companion resolution](#) was recently introduced in the US Senate by Senator Cory Booker (D-NJ) and eleven cosponsors.

Both of us had the privilege of knowing him and working with him. He was a courageous and tireless advocate for racial and economic justice and a leader who inspired others to follow him. More importantly, he was a humble man who loved and respected others, irrespective of their racial or ethnic backgrounds.

Following his death, our friend, Susan Glisson, the founding director of the Winter Institute, posted the following on [her Facebook page](#): “When I last saw him, he said he wished there was a button beside his bed that he could push every morning that would light up at my house so I would know he was thinking of me.”

Nothing could more vividly describe the man we so deeply admired. He leaves a legacy that will inspire countless generations of people to reach for the better angels of themselves.

Many are calling him one of the greatest Mississippians. We would call him one of the greatest Americans.

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