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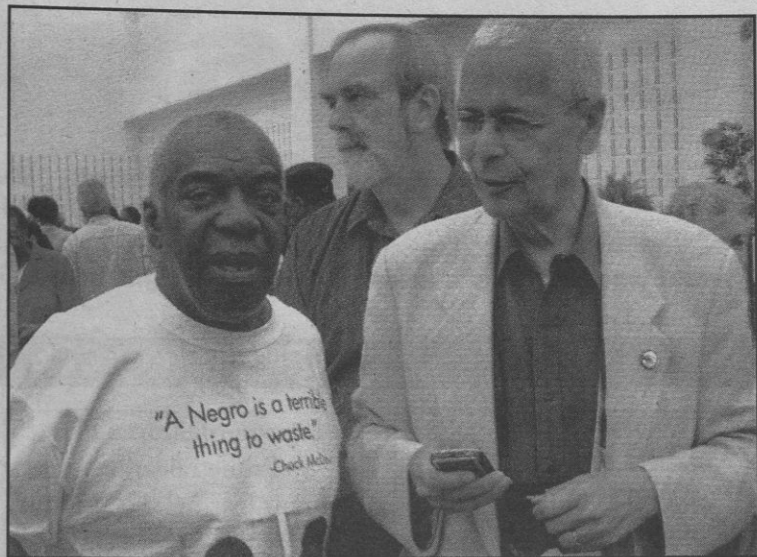
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Chuck McDew, left, and Julian Bond

Chuck McDew, 79

Black by birth, Jew by choice, civil rights activist extraordinaire

By Jonathan L. Entin
Special to The Advocate

NEWTON — Charles Frederick McDew, a key figure in the civil rights movement, died here on April 3 while spending Passover with friends and family. He was 79.

Why was a black man from Massillon, Ohio, spending Passover anywhere? Because he had converted to Judaism in college and remained faithful to the end. But let's not get ahead of the story.

Chuck McDew expected to play bigtime college football, but his father talked him out of that plan. James McDew had graduated from South Carolina State College, the Palmetto State's only public institution of higher education for African-Americans at the time, and then taught chemistry in segregated black schools. But the elder McDew could not get a teaching job when he moved to Ohio during the Great Depression. So he persuaded Chuck to attend his alma mater, to get more perspective on the black experience.

Chuck had never been south of Columbus, and he found life in segregated South Carolina in the late 1950s oppressive. Late in his first semester, he wound up being arrested three times in two days while returning to campus after Thanksgiving break. A police officer pulled his car over and assaulted him. Not yet committed to nonviolence, McDew hit back and wound up in jail with a broken arm and a broken jaw.

Released the next day, he got on a train back to school but was arrested again after refusing to sit in the baggage car when there were vacant seats in a whites-only coach. He eventually got back to Orangeburg, his college town, and was promptly arrested once more for walking through a whites-only park.

Not long afterward, the college brought a panel of local white clergy to campus. McDew asked the panelists if he and his fellow students would be welcome at services. Only the rabbi immediately said yes and invited

him to attend. McDew therefore decided to convert to Judaism and never looked back.

Then in February 1960, the Greensboro sit-in galvanized civil rights activism among college students across the South. McDew committed himself to that struggle and attended a spring conference that led to the birth of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. He became one of the founders of SNCC.

He never got as much publicity as other figures, like Julian Bond and John Lewis, both of whom deservedly became civil rights icons, or Bob Moses, the charismatic figure who devised the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer Project.

But Chuck McDew chaired SNCC for three years starting in late 1960 and led the organization through some of its most significant work. Ella Baker, who organized the conference that led to SNCC's creation, was delighted at McDew's selection. He was, she said, the only one who did not want the job; he was, however, the natural choice for leadership.

On McDew's watch, SNCC sent field workers into the most hostile parts of Alabama and Mississippi to try to encourage black voter registration. To say that this work was dangerous would be an understatement. For example, a white Mississippi state legislator in broad daylight shot and killed a black farmer who had been assisting SNCC, but none of the witnesses was willing to testify against the murderer.

SNCC workers laid the foundation for the Selma march and the Voting Rights Act. They also were among the Freedom Riders who encountered vicious white mobs that beat them, set one of their buses on fire, and nearly killed a Justice Department official.

As SNCC chair, Chuck McDew was constantly on the go. In February 1962, for instance, he went to Louisiana to check on a field worker who had been indicted for criminal anarchy, the only

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American since Sacco and Vanzetti to face that charge.

McDew was promptly arrested for "possible vagrancy." He was put into solitary confinement. Authorities turned the heat to maximum levels to make the already brutal conditions unbearable. They also left the lights in his windowless cell on and then off for days at a stretch. To maintain his bearings, McDew kept track of time using the cycle of meal deliveries.

McDew spent four weeks in that Louisiana jail before being released on bail, and the charges against him ultimately were dropped. The criminal anarchy indictment against the other SNCC worker also was eventually dismissed.

Meanwhile, the sheriff allowed segregationist groups to bring local white high school students to gawk at the prisoner in his isolation cell. One girl demanded

of McDew, "Say something Communist."

"Kish mir in tuchas," McDew instantly replied.

Completely oblivious to the meaning of that Yiddish phrase, the girl was delighted to have gotten a response.

Chuck McDew took his Judaism very seriously. Throughout his work with SNCC and for the rest of his life as a teacher, organizer and activist, he drew inspiration from Hillel: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am for myself only, what am I? If not now, when?"

Unfortunately, McDew passed away the day before the 50th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination. In death as in life, others overshadowed him. But Chuck McDew truly was an unsung hero.

Jonathan L. Entin is David L. Brennan Professor Emeritus of Law at Case Western Reserve University.