

Black History: Malcolm X

Scott: This weekend marked 50 years since the death of civil rights icon Malcolm X. The charismatic and controversial leader was gunned down in New York City. Today, we take a look at his life and his life-long push for the advancement of African-Americans. Scott Evans has more.

Ilyasah Shabazz: Malcolm X was just in his 20's when the world would learn of him.

Scott: In front of a crowded theater at Delaware State University, author Ilyasah Shabazz kicked off Black History Month with a speech about civil rights activist Malcolm X.

Caprice Green: I had to halt everything, all of my studies, all of my activities and everything. And I just had to come here and listen to her speak.

Shabazz: He committed to the defense of African-Americans victimized by race discrimination.

Scott: In public, she refers to him as Brother Malcolm. But here in her New York home she knows him by a different name.

Shabazz: Well Malcolm X is my father.

Scott: And now Ilyasah is trying to continue the work her father started many years ago.

As a kid in the mid 1920's, Malcolm Little, as he was known then, grew up in Lansing, Michigan.

What was this time period like for black people in America?

Shabazz: For the most part, you had a lot of black people who lived in a community and they didn't venture too far out of that community because if you did, someone could come and decide that they were going to lynch you. You know, tie you up around that tree and hang you. They could do anything they wanted. There was no law that protected black people.

Scott: Ilyasah has written several books about the struggles her father faced growing up, detailing the murder of Malcolm's father by white supremacists, and how his family was a target because they fought for equality.

Shabazz: From the loss of his father, the mother no longer with him. He's no longer with his siblings, so that's a painful situation. When you're in pain, sometimes you resort to a self-destructive behavior. You might start drinking, you might start smoking cigarettes, you might start smoking other things.

Scott: And that's exactly what happened to Malcolm. That is, until the law caught up with him. He was arrested and sent to prison where he served six years behind bars for burglary.

So how did things change for him once he was in prison?

Shabazz: His brother had written to him and said 'there is this religion' and the religion was very similar to the way they were raised. You know, similar to the values.

Scott: The religion was called the Nation of Islam, and ultimately, it gave him a platform to go from felon to freedom fighter.

The Nation of Islam paired traditional Muslim values with the Black Nationalist movement, meaning that only black Americans were allowed to join, and many of them were recruited in prison. The organization promoted blacks as a chosen people, deserving of their own government and land.

But for some, the religion was considered a radicalistic organization that preached blacks were superior to whites. Malcolm Little, who renamed himself Malcolm X to start a new beginning in his life, became a minister and spokesperson for the controversial organization. He began to lead a new movement in the northern states.

Around the same time, a reverend in the south was also fighting for change. His name, Dr. Martin Luther king Jr.

Shabazz: They were both working towards the same thing. They were fighting injustice against their people.

Scott: But their strategies were very different.

Shabazz: My father came along and said, "Wait a minute black man! You're messed up. You're messed up because you think you're nothing."

Scott: Malcolm didn't agree with the peaceful protests in the southern parts of the U.S. He argued that all people had the right to self-defense, and that meant if the police attacked you, you didn't sit there. You had the right to fight back.

Shabazz: And he was like, 'okay, you want to integrate those restaurants, you want to integrate your school. But I'm here to say, we don't need to ask anybody can we come to a restaurant. We are demanding our human rights.'

Scott: From Malcolm's teachings came groups like the Black Panther Party, which monitored the behavior of the police and armed black citizens to fight police brutality.

But his popularity made him a threat to the people in power at the Nation of Islam. And the group forced him out.

His faith led him on the spiritual journey to Mecca in Saudi Arabia, the holiest city in Islam. His pilgrimage showed him that people of all races could in fact come together peacefully.

Shabazz: When he went to the Middle East, he was greeted as a dignitary, as a scholar. And to see that some of these people were white people who are respectful to you and loving towards you, you figure, 'oh, so it's not a black and white problem, right? It's a problem in America.'

Scott: And so, he changed his name once again; this time, to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz and shifted his message to one that was more inclusive, though deepening the divide between him and the Nation of Islam.

This represents the spot where on Feb 21, 1965 while giving a speech, Malcolm X was assassinated by members of the Nation of Islam, an organization he had represented for over a decade.

He left behind his wife and six daughters, including Ilyasah, who now 50 years later, is following in her father's footsteps to address injustices still facing blacks across America and around the world.

The "black lives matter" movement, which were protests around the country against police brutality, has re-energized the younger generation to use their voices for change.

Shabazz: It was this generation who expressed their discontent and skillful use of social media to rapidly organize and galvanize and educate the masses on important human rights issues. And I say, give yourself a round of applause.

Scott: Her message to the students, you are never too young to make a difference.

Scott Evans, Channel One News.