

The Revolutionary Everyday Courage of “The Barber of Birmingham”



James Armstrong, also known as “The Barber of Birmingham.” Photo: Robin Fryday

by **Katti Gray**

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On the patch of sidewalk where James Armstrong waited to cast his barrier-breaking ballot on Election Day 2008, he whiled away the time by randomly noting the spectacularly obvious: The sun was beaming brightly on Birmingham, Ala. Never, in all his activist years, had he seen a line of black voters stretch down the block and around the corner.

He figured a cup of coffee is a fine way to kick-start a morning like that, but pour a little scotch in it and you really got something going on.

Scotch and coffee? “Go on, now, don’t tell nobody else,” another waiting voter, laughing and half-scolding, tells then 85-year-old Armstrong. “You on TV.”

“Might as well tell the truth,” Armstrong replies, glancing in the direction of the camera that’s been trailing him. “That’s what they want is the truth.”

Armstrong is the raconteur, hell-raiser strategist and smack-talker protagonist of [“The Barber of Birmingham: Foot Soldier of the Civil Rights Movement,”](#) a 26-minute documentary short that’s been shown at Sundance and is slated for August screenings at film festivals in Birmingham, Hollywood, New York City and on Martha’s Vineyard.

“I wanted it to be about the unsung, the ones who risked their lives and livelihood but didn’t get the recognition,” said Robin Fryday, the California photographer who conceived the documentary, then landed in Alabama to scout out a fitting central character.

For certain students of history, Armstrong, who died in November 2009, at age 86, shortly after he retired from barbering, is hardly a total unknown. “Have you met the barber?” is the question from Alabamans that led Fryday and her co-producer/director Gail Dolgin to Armstrong Barber Shop on 8th Avenue North, on the black side of town. He began renting out that storefront when he left the Army, which is where he started cutting heads, those of white folks included.



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Martin Luther King, Jr. was one of his customers. "When he come in Birmingham and need a haircut, they'd bring him out here to me," says Armstrong, who himself was locked up a half-dozen times for rightly defying Jim Crow.

Dwight and Floyd Armstrong, James' sons, were the two black boys whom segregationist Gov. George Wallace tried but failed to block from enrolling in Birmingham's Graymont Elementary School in 1963. (Racist diehards struck back with a series of bombings, including one that killed four little girls at 16th Street Baptist Church.)

As backdrops to Armstrong's story, civil rights movers-and-shakers and Alabama residents Amelia Boynton Robinson, who turns 100 on Aug. 18, and C.T. Vivian, 87, one of MLK's lieutenants, also are featured in the film. "Freedom—in no form—was ever given to us," Vivian says in the film. "We had to fight for it all the way."

Interspersed throughout the documentary is black-and-white news footage of white police famously battering and hosing down black folks on courthouse steps and on Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma. There's the black woman being interviewed by a reporter about her nine futile attempts to register to vote; she hadn't correctly answered a white voter registrar's question on, for example, a point of constitutional law.

"If you want to register, you have to have property, a clean record. You have to know the Constitution. And you have to have two white men, not women, to vouch for you," recalls Amelia Boynton Robinson, a Selma-based leader of the movement.

"Supreme Courts have split decisions on the Constitution but [blacks] had to interpret it to the satisfaction of the registrar," says Bernard Lafayette, 71, co-founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, also in the film.

Armstrong recounts other insanities in that litany: "How many windows in the courthouse building. ... How many seeds in a watermelon?"

In that film frame, Armstrong is reclining in a well-worn barber chair, crisscrossed and held together with duct and packaging tape. He is buttoned-down and bow-tied. Sunday go-to-meeting clothes were his style and preference, says son Dwight Armstrong, a logistics coordinator for General Electric in Louisville, Ky. "The only time he didn't wear a tie is when he was working in the yard. There was a persona he was trying to portray. He was about business. All the time. When he wasn't at home, he was at a meeting. He was serious about black people growing and standing up for themselves through education, through discipline, and dedication to the advancement of the race."

The viewer glimpses that resolve through the wood-paneled walls of Armstrong Barber Shop. They display a tacked- and pasted-on collage chronicling a black trajectory. Alongside obligatory barbershop posters of different haircuts, there are miniature American flags, magazine cutouts of famous moments and people in history. There are photos of Jesse Jackson and of newly freed Nelson Mandela, his fist raised in victory. "Kerry Edwards" and "Wilder for Governor" bumper stickers are juxtaposed against replicas, in capital letters, of "COLORED SEATED IN THE REAR" and "WHITE ONLY" warning signs. A poster of the seven black men in Congress in 1872—before a white backlash incited the poll tax, other riots and terrors—is encased in plastic.

"I got a picture of everybody in here that was doing something. When we started the struggle, I joined the struggle," Armstrong says.

After Armstrong died, Darren Armstrong, 28, a graduate student at Vanderbilt University, took his grandfather's place for the March 2010 annual commemorative crossing of Pettus Bridge. With his father, Dwight, Darren carried the American flag that his grandfather had waved as he marched over that span each year. The elder Armstrong had filled in the flag's white stripes with "1965 Selma-to-Montgomery SCLC," using a black Magic Marker.

"It was an overwhelming experience, especially as I was approaching the bridge, thinking of the things I knew had happened to my grandfather, every thing that happened in the movement and how times have changed—even if we don't live in a post-racial society," the grandson says. "I looked at my father, and he was tearing up. It was a time of celebration and remembrance and still keeping in my mind the fact that the civil rights struggle continues. There's still a lot of fighting to be done."

"The Barber of Birmingham" will enrage and inspire, and make any viewer with half a mind and a whole heart cry. It will provoke many who also cast a history-shattering vote in 2008 to ask what the hell happened to change you can believe in. When will it come? We wept as Aretha's song ushered a brilliant black striver into the Oval House. But black unemployment is [up to there](#). The longstanding and never-before poor—black, brown, red, yellow or white—are catching it. That's hardly the forward motion that James Armstrong and his walk-your-talk army of everyday, black agitants intended.

Washington's [run-on acquiescence to the rich](#), and other persuading powers, is neither lost on the filmmaker nor the Armstrongs, who consider Robin Fryday grafted-in kin. Still, as a collective, they are convinced that the good barber, were he alive, would be in President Obama's corner, do or die.

"Change takes time. I heard that over and over from many of the foot soldiers. They knew that," Fryday says.

James Armstrong was an ordinary man, doing exceptional things in a needing era. He did not own the building that housed his barbershop; he was a tenant. He drove away from that Election Day 2008 polling place in his old Electra 225, held together with chains, coat hangers, and tape, festooned with bumper stickers whose slogans had mostly faded away. He was wearing one of the signature fedoras that, after he died, his MBA grandson gathered, along with James Armstrong's old campaign buttons and bow ties, for himself. Lest he forget.

Darren Armstrong treasures the keepsakes. More than that, he loves that his storytelling grandfather emerged from spit-in-your-face, hang-you-from-a-tree Jim Crowism without evident bitterness.

His granddaddy made it through the eighth grade, or something like that, Darren Armstrong said. He was an engaging, charming, quirky, idiosyncratic kind of guy who would leave those bent toward a certain kind of

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humor in stitches. "He bought this police radio, and he'd sit in the dark listening to everything that came across it: 'This is what the Negroes are doing now?!' " It was the delivery, not the subject matter, that made you fall out laughing, Darren explained. His grandfather was the type who—in Bible Belt Alabama, no less—could pull off a half-joke about drinking scotch for breakfast.

In the documentary, some young men, arriving to let the barber cut their heads, marveled at the history leaping off the barbershop's walls. And the man who helped to write it, indeed, had them laughing out loud.

"I love this country, I love Alabama and I love Birmingham. I tell 'em all the time, 'If I die in Birmingham, I know I'll go to heaven.' Well, how ya know that?" Armstrong pauses to get the timing right, and rev up into his own bittersweet chuckle: "I caught all the hell right here."

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"The Barber of Birmingham" is in the line-up Aug. 9-13 at Martha's Vineyard Film Festival; Aug 11-18 at Hollywood Shorts Film Festival; Aug. 12-18 at DocuWeeks in Manhattan; and Aug. 26-28 at Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival in Birmingham. A complete list of screenings is [available on the film's website](#).

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Agreat and beautiful tribute indeed.

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Darren, this is a beautiful tribute. Thanks for posting it where others can read about this courageous man and his sons. I am proud of you as always.

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The "rightly" in "rightly defying Jim Crow" is hardly necessary. No one wrongly defied Jim Crow.

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