



LOCAL OBITUARIES

# He marched for civil rights — and wrote a song about pastrami. Sherwood Ross has died at 85

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July 01, 2018 09:41 AM  
Updated 3 hours 59 minutes ago

"The phrase 'too old' doesn't exist."

Sherwood Ross lived that.

At 72, Ross was not only taking guitar classes at Miami Dade College, but was also running and jogging several miles on the beach each day to stay fit, he told the Miami Herald in 2005.

Ross, 85, died June 21 as a result of complications from a brain injury two years ago. He was walking to the gym in July 2016 when he fainted from the heat. The fall caused a brain bleed that left him in a coma for 30 days, which he survived but never fully recovered.

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No matter his age, Ross wanted to use his time productively and in the interest of social justice and peace. When asked by his son, Karl Ross, to watch an episode of "The Wire," the elder Ross — then in his 80s — would decline, then to go to his room and write.

"He would write a blog or article about whatever atrocities or injustices might be occurring — whether U.S. drone strikes killing civilians overseas or political issues here at home," Karl Ross said in an interview last week.

Activism was his father's passion.

Sherwood Ross was best known for his involvement in James Meredith's "March Against Fear" to promote black voter registration in rural Mississippi in June 1966. Ross — a 33-year-old radio newsman at the time — was at the White House Conference on Civil Rights when he attended Meredith's news conference and offered to serve as his press coordinator.

"He feared for Meredith's safety," Aram Goudsouzian wrote in his book "Down to the Crossroads: Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Meredith March Against Fear." "If he raised the march's profile, he could surround Meredith with reporters."

On the second day of the march — which started in Memphis and ended in Jackson — Meredith was shot while walking in Hernando, Mississippi. Sherwood was captured tending to the injured Meredith, and accompanied him to the hospital.

Meredith, best known as the first black student to attend the University of Mississippi in 1962, was able to finish the march in Jackson after being treated for his wounds.

Ross was not new to the civil rights world at the time of the march.

A Chicago native, Ross moved to Miami with his family as a teenager and graduated from Miami Senior High School. He briefly joined the U.S. Air Force before attending the University of Miami in the early 1950s.

He graduated from UM with a degree in race relations — the "first of its kind," according to his son. Following a stint in news — working as a Miami Herald copy boy in college and as a reporter for the Chicago Daily after graduation — Ross became involved with the National Urban League, after being inspired by activist Saul Alinsky.

"My dad realized threats to American democracy and everything this country is supposed to stand for can come from within," his son said. "He abhorred violence and the senseless slaughter of innocents. He believed in the proverbial pen as his weapon of choice."

Ross became a speechwriter and a columnist with the Urban League, then went on to become a talk show host at WOL Radio/1450 AM — the leading black radio station in D.C.

Ross eventually left activism to build a public relations firm, but continued writing for Reuters and Veterans Today into his later years. Along with journalism, Ross took an interest in arts later in his life, becoming a fixture in local pubs and the Miami arts community.

He joined South Florida poetry and songwriting circles, and wrote a song called "I Sliced Pastrami for the CIA and Found God."

"Sherwood was a vibrant and beautiful soul — he will be missed," friend and fellow poet Sheena Szuri wrote, adding that he was an award-winning Miami poet.

Ross was also an avid runner and fitness enthusiast — winning multiple state championships at U.S.A. Track and Field events for older athletes.

After his injury, Ross stayed optimistic.

"A few days after coming out of his coma, he told me he wanted me to write down 'positive attitude,' " his son said. He was able to walk with assistance for a while, but suffered some health setbacks. Despite that, his son said that he was reading a book on how to live to 100 when he died.

"Life was a party and he never wanted to leave," Karl Ross said.

Sherwood Ross is survived by two sisters, Ludmilla Coven and Chaia Ross. He is also survived by four children — Sean, Karl, Elizabeth, and Andrei — and five grandchildren, as well as long-time partner Dolores Curry of Staunton, Virginia.

Ross' family will be scattering his ashes in the Black Hills of South Dakota, in Spearfish Canyon, as Ross himself wrote about in a poem called "When



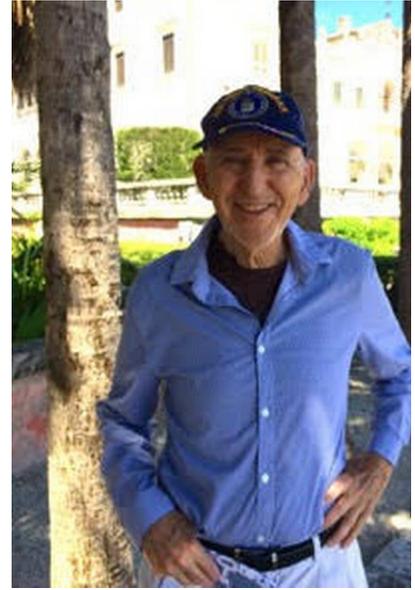
Sherwood Ross attends to James Meredith after he was shot June 6, 1966 on Highway 51 about two miles south of Hernando, Miss. Meredith was leading a 'March Against Fear' to encourage blacks to exercise their voting rights. Meredith, who defied segregation to enroll at the University of Mississippi in 1962, completed the march from Memphis, Tenn., to Jackson, Miss., after treatment of his wounds. Aubrey James Norvell spent 18 months and 24 days of a two-year sentence in the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman for the shooting. Ross, a 33-year-old radio newsman from Washington D.C., said he was acting as Meredith's press spokesman as well as reporting for stations in Washington and New York. (By Ramon Himel / The Commercial Appeal)

Ramon Himel - The Commercial Appeal

I Die."

Szuri is organizing a poetry tribute for Ross at the Betsy Hotel in Miami Beach on Aug. 16, to pay tribute to the artist and share his legacy. The event will be open to the community as a poetry event and memorial.





Sherwood Ross, reading his poem "Jesus in Mississippi," an account of the Civil Rights march he participated in with James Meredith, at a Books and Books in Coral Gables.