

Congressional Gold Medal honors 'foot soldiers' of rights marches, including Charles Vatterott

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Created 02/25/2016 - 12:38pm



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[Vatterott001.jpg](#) [1]

Charles F. Vatterot Jr.

Andrew Young was a stalwart in the Civil Rights Movement, an associate and good friend of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. He was by King's side at civil rights and voting rights marches and, sadly, when King was assassinated in Memphis, Tenn.

Young became United States Ambassador to the United Nations then mayor of Atlanta.

At that time, in the early 1980s, Young made a special trip to little New Haven, Mo., population 2,000, along the Missouri River and about halfway between Washington and Herrmann on Highway 100. John Vatterott had invited Young to the family's Cedar Creek Conference Center to discuss the rebirth of the Catholic Apostolate for Interracial Justice, and Young gladly accepted, which begs the question:

Why would a former U.N. ambassador, the mayor of a metropolis with 477,000 people, take time out of his busy schedule and travel about 600 miles to a tiny hamlet in the middle of nowhere with 0.4 percent of

Atlanta's population?

Simple. A Vatterott — and the Catholics — had asked.

Young told Vatterott that he accepted the invitation because the appearance of priests and nuns in Selma, Ala., — arriving from St. Louis and Kansas City on planes chartered by Vatterott's father, Charles — in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday "made the difference in the whole (voting rights) movement. ... The priests and nuns who showed up in their clerical garb, in force, gave the movement credibility."

Young, an eyewitness to history, recognized the key role of Catholics and Vatterott, and now the United States Congress has recognized it with its highest civilian honor — the Congressional Gold Medal.

Five of Charles F. Vatterott Jr.'s children — John, Chris, Greg and Catherine Vatterott, and Claire Hundelt — grandchild Elle and niece Celine were in Washington D.C., Feb. 24, as civil rights activist Rev. Frederick D. Reese, 86, accepted the award on behalf of Vatterott, who died in 1971, and other "foot soldiers" of voting rights marches in Selma in 1965.

Chris Vatterott called the award "a proud moment," but he quickly changed the focus from the gold medal's meaning to just the Vatterott family to its importance for the larger community.

"It's a great opportunity to showcase St. Louis' involvement 50 years ago; St. Louis hasn't had a lot of good press recently," he said, referencing events related to Ferguson since August 2014. "This is history that people don't know about."

The history of St. Louis' involvement probably wouldn't have happened without the contribution of Charles Vatterott, the area's largest home builder in the post-World War II Era, and his friendship with Cardinal Joseph E. Ritter.

Then-Archbishop Ritter integrated Catholic schools in the archdiocese in 1947, seven years before the Supreme Court case of *Brown v Board of Education* made it the law of the land. When Ritter came to town in 1946, he found an ally in Vatterott, who had fought racial injustice for years and whose family still does so today through the Vatterott Foundation. So, when King put out the call for clergy to march after Bloody Sunday, Cardinal Ritter and Vatterott were in lockstep to make it happen. In just 36 hours, they filled two planes — one in St. Louis and another in Kansas City — with not only priests and nuns but rabbis and Protestant pastors, an ecumenical group that bumped Catholics.

The planes flew to Selma, and Vatterott brought \$25,000 in case anyone got arrested and needed bail money. The march that day, with St. Louis priests and nuns at the front, went only a block before being stopped. But the group gave witness to why they were in Selma. Sister Antona Ebo, FSM, famously spoke "as a Negro" for voting rights for all, whether white or black. And Sister Thomas Marguerita (Rosemary Flanigan), CSJ, just as famously refused a gentleman's offer to kneel on his coat in prayer. The reason: She wanted to go home with the dust of Selma on her habit.

Charles Vatterott returned to Selma twice in the next few weeks, first to give a relic of St. Martin de Porres to the family of Rev. James Reeb, who was killed days before, then to join 400 St. Louisians among 3,000 people who triumphantly marched from Selma to Montgomery. Federal troops protected the marchers after President Lyndon B. Johnson had asked a joint session of Congress to introduce and pass a voting rights bill.

That triumph might not have happened without the "foot soldiers" of Charles Vatterott, priests and nuns from St. Louis.

"It was kind of amazing they were able to pull this off in such a short time," John Vatterott said.

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