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Opinion

Foundation still carrying on Lewis' legacy of 'good trouble'

Nonprofit's mission is not just about celebrating past heroes — it is about empowering all Americans to follow in their footsteps.



Work on digitizing civil rights icon John Lewis' congressional archives is underway and will make it easier for people to study his commitment to justice, equality and peace. (AJC 2008)

By Michael Collins and Detria Austin Everson – guest columnists

Before his death in 2020, Congressman John Lewis developed plans to establish the John and Lillian Miles Lewis Foundation to carry forward the legacies he and his wife, Lillian, built — promoting peace, civil rights and human dignity. As Lewis wrote in “Across That Bridge,” “Ours is not the struggle of one day, one week, or one year. ... Ours is the struggle of a lifetime, or maybe even many lifetimes, and each one of us in every generation must do our part.”

John and Lillian Miles Lewis entrusted future generations to continue fighting for justice and making “good trouble” along the way. When the foundation was established, John-Miles Lewis, their son, said his father envisioned “it would support good work, inspire good troublemaking and do its part to make the world a better place.” Leading efforts to preserve and continue their legacy is a deep responsibility and an honor.

Empowering the next generation of civic leaders

Central to our mission is amplifying youth civic engagement. The B.R.I.D.G.E. Program (Building Resilience, Innovation, and Driving Generational Engagement) fosters civic participation among high school students by providing essential tools for educators and students. At the collegiate level, Good Trouble Conversations engaged students from Georgia Tech, Spelman College and Georgia State University, reflecting on John Lewis' legacy.



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Preserving and promoting civil rights history

Our work extends to the arts and public memory. Work on digitizing Congressman Lewis' congressional archives is underway and will make it easier for people to study his commitment to justice, equality and peace.

We helped install commemorative plaques in Selma, Alabama, honoring voting rights during the 60th anniversary of Bloody Sunday, and we met with the Rev. Bernard Lafayette Jr. and foot soldiers who marched with Lewis and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

We partnered with MARTA to unveil the #JohnLewisBus, honoring both John and Lillian Miles Lewis, ensuring their stories inspire future generations.

In January, we joined Minecraft Education to relaunch “Lessons in Good Trouble,” allowing students to experience pivotal moments in the Civil Rights Movement. It has been downloaded more than 10 million times. Recently, we partnered with Microsoft to bring this experience to students and teachers from four Atlanta-area elementary schools.



A Marta-wrapped bus honors civil rights activist John Lewis, ensuring his stories inspire future generations. (Miguel Martinez/AJC 2024)

The foundation is designing a civil rights educational experience for every student at the Georgia School of Orthodontics, featuring discussions and civil rights tours. This partnership includes a pledge of \$8.5 million toward the John Lewis Legacy Scholarships.

As Theatrical Outfit’s Community Partner for “Young John Lewis,” we are excited to share this hip-hop musical tracing 10 formative years of Lewis’ life.

Celebrating ‘good trouble’

Our reach is global. The inaugural class of John Lewis Peace Fellows brought Lewis’ philosophy of nonviolence to regions facing conflict including Haiti, the Philippines, Jordan, Papua New Guinea, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Venezuela. We organized a civil rights tour of Atlanta and Montgomery, Alabama, for these fellows, deepening their understanding of the American Civil Rights Movement.

We are sponsoring the first three Douglass-O'Connell-Lewis interns (Pell Grant-eligible students from Atlanta-area colleges) for an eight-week internship in Ireland this summer and supporting the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights' John Lewis Young Leaders Program. Both efforts will equip students with the skills and sense of history to become effective social justice and civic leaders.

Building partnerships and carrying the legacy forward

None of this work happens in isolation. The foundation has forged partnerships with schools, advocacy organizations and cultural institutions in Atlanta and beyond to extend our reach and deepen our impact.

We are ready to meet the moment. We need to build up our civic and democratic institutions. We need to help people understand how government works, encourage civic engagement and make it easier for people to vote. We need to preserve our history and celebrate the achievements of the Civil Rights Movement.

This year's [Good Trouble Gala](#) in Atlanta on May 29 will spotlight those who embody the enduring legacies of both John and Lillian Miles Lewis. The Carry On Award honors individuals whose courage, compassion and lifelong dedication to equity, justice and human rights reflect the enduring principles that defined the life and work of Congressman John Lewis. The Lillian Miles Lewis Luminary Award — an honor that recognizes individuals whose visionary leadership and lifelong commitment to education, the arts, and global understanding — reflects the enduring legacy of Lillian Miles Lewis.

At the gala, we will also announce the recipients of the Good Troublemaker Neighborhood Grants and Scholarships, celebrating organizations carrying on the commitment to building the beloved community and youth who believe "good trouble" is still relevant today.

Honorary co-chairs include Atlanta Mayor André Dickens, former State Sen. Jason Carter, Broadcast Executive Xernona Clayton, former Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin and Ambassador Andrew Young. Gala co-chairs are entrepreneur and philanthropist Arthur M. Blank, JLMLF Board Chair Michael Collins, founder and CEO of Paramount Consulting Group Tharon Johnson, John and Lillian Miles Lewis' son John-Miles Lewis, and President and CEO of Southern Company Chris Womack.

Our mission is not just about celebrating past heroes — it is about empowering all Americans to follow in their footsteps. The principles and examples set by John and Lillian Miles Lewis have given us a roadmap for how to move forward. We have laid the groundwork to keep the Lewis legacy going strong. Our work is making an impact in Atlanta and around the world. We invite you to join us as we build up and train the next generation of leaders.



Michael Collins is board chair of the John and Lillian Miles Lewis Foundation.



Detria Austin Everson is president and CEO of the John and Lillian Miles Lewis Foundation.