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OPINION

Bond forged in history: Lewis and Obama

Today's opening of Obama presidential museum makes this a good time to revisit the deep relationship between the two men.

By Michael E. Collins

For The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

The Obama Presidential Center Museum, which opens to the public today in Chicago, includes several tributes to late Congressman John Lewis, including the John Lewis Plaza,

a "vibrant outdoor space that celebrates the spirit and legacy of Congressman John Lewis."

There are moments when the past and future reach across time and touch. The relationship between Lewis and President Barack Obama was one of those moments, a living bridge between the marches of Selma and the sunrise of an American era.

From the moment Rep. Lewis first met the young freshman senator from Illinois, he sensed something rare: intellect, authenticity and an unwavering belief in ordinary people's power to create extraordinary change.

Lewis, who had given his body to justice on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965, recognized in Obama the promise of a new generation. Their relationship grew into one marked by mutual admiration, shared purpose and a commitment to justice and democracy.

That bond first found public expression in a deeply personal way. Lewis was so inspired by Obama that he knew immediately who he wanted as the keynote speaker for his 65th birthday gala in Atlanta. During that same period, Obama asked Lewis to show him the Civil Rights Movement through his own eyes, not through textbooks or briefings but through lived memory. Together, they toured the King Center for Non-violent Social Change, two men of different generations standing in the shadow of a shared inheritance.



John Lewis returned every year to Selma, Ala., to walk across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. In 2015, he commemorated the 50th anniversary of Bloody Sunday by joining hands with President Barack Obama and his family and leading a march. JACQUELYN MARTIN/AP-2015

Lewis saw something larger in 2008 Obama campaign

Lewis' confidence in Obama deepened into conviction in February 2008, with one of the most consequential decisions of his political life.

He had endorsed Hillary Clinton early in the campaign, based on years of friendship and deep respect. But something was shifting in the country, and Lewis felt it keenly.

"Something is happening in America," he said. "There is a movement, there is a spirit, there is an enthusiasm in the hearts and minds of the American people that I have not seen in a long time."

Lewis believed a representative's highest duty was to the people. In Obama's campaign, he saw something larger than a candidacy: "The beginning of a new movement in American political history."

Before the presidency, Lewis had made clear how much he believed in Obama's capacity to carry that history forward.

He helped bring Sen. Obama to historic Brown Chapel AME

Church in Selma to deliver the annual Bloody Sunday message. Following the service, the two walked hand in hand across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, retracing steps paid for in blood decades before. It was a powerful symbol of continuity between the civil rights struggle and the ongoing fight to protect American democracy.

The honors that followed were among the most meaningful of Lewis' life. When the White House announced that he would receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, Lewis was overwhelmed. "This is too much. I only tried to help others. I'm just a boy from Troy (Alabama)," he said.

To receive that distinction from the first Black president of the U.S. carried a weight no words could fully measure.

Obama delivered congressman's eulogy as an act of love

Then came 2015 and the 50th Anniversary of Bloody Sunday. Lewis envisioned the commemoration not only as

a moment to honor the sacrifices of the past, but as an opportunity to recommit the nation to the work still ahead. Obama would stand on that bridge not as a senator, as he once had, but as president of the United States. His remarks that day stand among the defining speeches of his presidency, a reminder of America's unfinished journey toward justice and equality.

Lewis liked to speak of getting into "good trouble." His life was a testament to that principle, the willingness to put comfort, safety and even survival on the line in service of a larger truth. He saw in Obama not just a candidate or a president, but proof that the marches, beatings, jailings and sacrifices had mattered.

And so, it was fitting that when Lewis died in July 2020, it was Obama who delivered the eulogy, a final act of love between men bound together by something greater than friendship or politics. The eulogy served not only as a farewell to a beloved friend, but as a call to future gener-

ations to carry forward the work to which Lewis had dedicated his life.

Together, the stories of John Lewis and Barack Obama reflect one of the great chapters of American democracy: a bond forged through history, strengthened by shared values and consecrated to the pursuit of justice, equality and democracy. They remind us that progress is chosen, fought for and passed on, one generation reaching back to honor those who came before, and forward to inspire those who will come after.

The naming of the plaza outside of the Obama Center for John Lewis is a testament to that bond and a fitting tribute to the relationship they shared.

Michael E. Collins is the board chair and interim president for the John and Lillian Miles Lewis Foundation; he served as Rep. Lewis' chief of staff and floor assistant for 20 years.

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