

# deadly authority



**BENJAMIN BROWN**

1945-1967

Civil rights worker killed when police fired on protesters, Jackson, Miss.

**“Nobody ever came to me and explained why. Nobody, no public official or anything ever came down and said they were sorry my son was killed.”**

OLLIE MAE BROWN

Ben Brown was a child in Jackson, Miss., when the Montgomery bus boycott brought the Civil Rights Movement into national focus. He grew up with the spirit of the movement, questioning his parents about the way blacks were treated and eager to learn about the heritage of his race.

By age 16, Ben Brown was an activist. He marched to protest the attacks on the Freedom Riders in 1961. In 1963, he was among thousands who took part in a silent memorial march for the slain civil rights leader Medgar Evers. In high school, he helped organize boycotts against discriminatory businesses. After he graduated, he went to work full time in voter registration.

During the next four years, Brown was harassed, shot at, arrested and jailed for his civil rights activities. His mother, Ollie Mae Brown, urged him to take his talents north where he would be safer, but he refused.

In 1965, Brown was among 1,000 protesters who were arrested for picketing Mississippi's all-white state legislature. The protesters were imprisoned at a fairground because the prison could not hold them. During his incarceration, Brown was walking through a food line when he accidentally dropped his plate into a tank of boiling water. A guard forced him to reach in to retrieve the plate, and Brown's hand was badly burned.

Threats and abuse did not dampen Brown's spirit for long. He began working for the Delta Ministry, a project of the

National Council of Churches that worked to combat poverty and discrimination. Brown traveled throughout the poor Delta counties, living on a stipend of \$10 a week. He especially enjoyed working with children — he told them stories of famous black figures, taught them games and took them on field trips to the zoo.

By 1966, the intense civil rights activity that characterized Mississippi Freedom Summer had died down, and national civil rights groups were focusing their attention elsewhere. The Delta Ministry, a civil rights group that outlasted SNCC, CORE and the SCLC in Mississippi, was running low on funds and could no longer pay all of its workers. Brown saw that it was time to move on in his life.

On the day before Christmas in 1966, Brown married a fellow civil rights worker, Margaret Willis, and by spring they were expecting their first child. Brown worked full time as a truck driver and no longer went to civil rights meetings and demonstrations. To his mother's great relief, he was settling down.

## LYNCH STREET

On May 10, 1967, violence erupted on Lynch Street, a short walk from Ben and Margaret's apartment. The trouble began with a student protest against city police actions on Jackson State College's campus. The protest grew louder, and non-students from the downtown area joined in. Police sealed off the street with barricades,

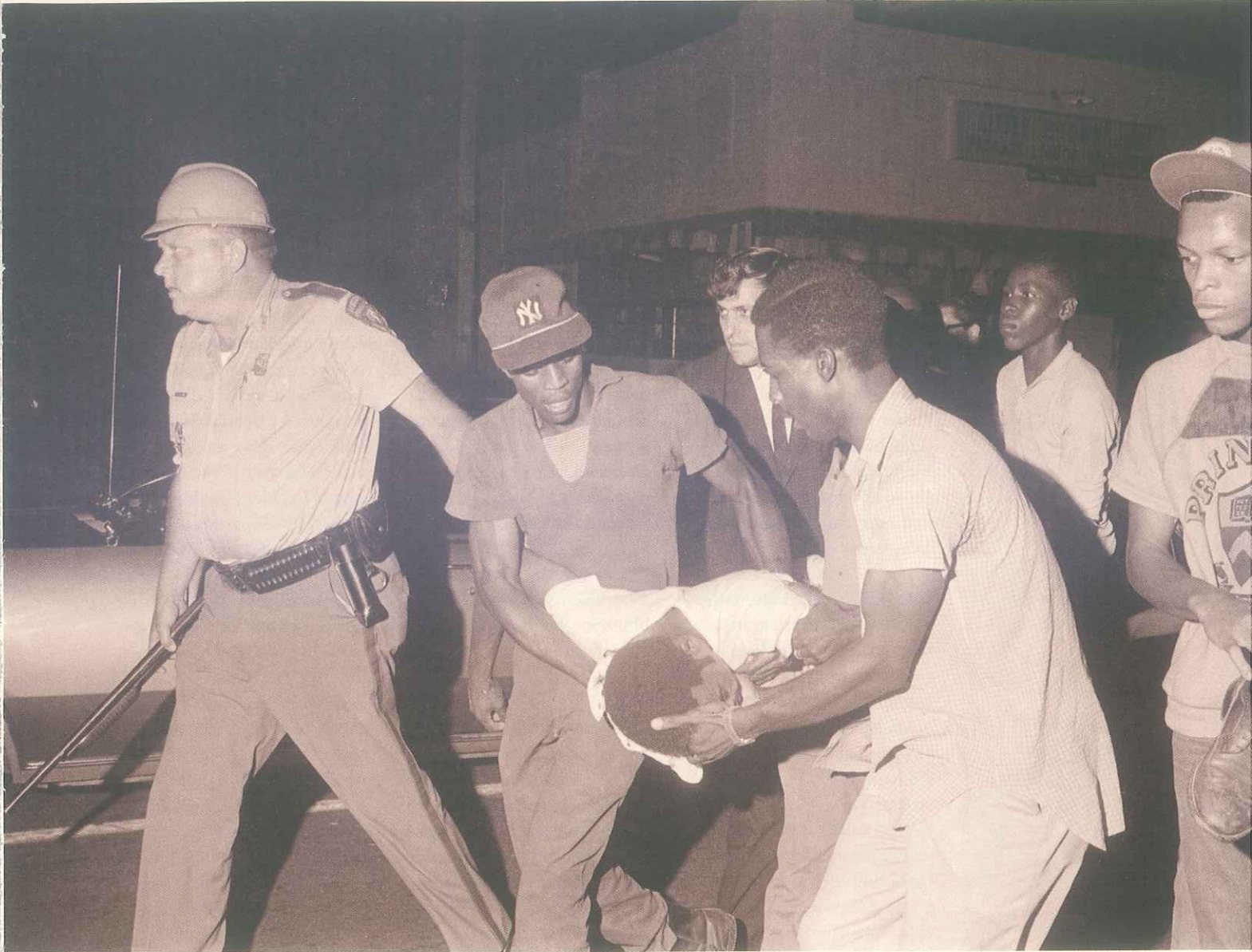
and some protesters reacted by burning the barricades. The next evening, May 11, city police were joined by state highway patrol and National Guard troops who confronted the protesters with rifles and bayonets.

Toward the end of the second day of protests, Ben Brown walked with a friend into a Lynch Street café to pick up a sandwich to take home to Margaret. The café was full, so they started down the sidewalk toward another restaurant. Ben had never believed in violent protest, and he had not taken part in this one. As he started down Lynch Street, protesters ahead of him began throwing bricks and bottles at the line of police behind him. One officer was struck with a piece of glass and fired his shotgun into the air. The protesters turned to flee as more policemen opened fire.

Ben and his friend ran when they heard the first gunshot, but Ben was struck by the second round of blasts. He fell to the ground with shotgun wounds in the back of his head and his lower back. A minister who saw the shooting started to help him, but police refused to let anyone near Brown. He lay bleeding on the ground for 10 minutes before a National Guard medic came to his aid. It was 45 minutes before an ambulance took him to the hospital. He died early the following morning, his 22nd birthday.

Two other black youths who were shot that night survived. No action was ever taken against the officers who fired their weapons.





Ollie Mae Brown never stopped trying to find out who shot her son. Although eyewitness testimony showed Brown was not among the rioters, and police admitted it was a “wild shot” that killed him, the officer who shot Brown was never identified. Mrs. Brown sued the Jackson Police Department for the death of her son, but her case depended on information contained in the department’s

own investigative records, which the police refused to release. After nearly 20 years of trying to win justice in the case, she was left with only unanswered questions.

“Nobody ever came to me and explained why,” she said. “Nobody, no public official or anything ever came down and said they were sorry my son was killed.”

The Jackson police finally

reopened the case in 1998, but no arrests were made. A grand jury concluded in 2001 that two lawmen, Buddy Kane and Lloyd Jones, were responsible for Brown’s death. Both men were dead, and the case was closed. A second lawsuit, seeking \$20 million for Brown’s wrongful death, was filed on October 14, 2003, and the Jackson City Council subsequently voted to settle for \$50,000. ●

Brown is finally carried to an ambulance after being left bleeding on the street for 45 minutes after he was shot.