

# The Awakening of Mamie Till-Mobley: Examining Resiliency Within Personal Tragedy Transformed To Activism



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**"Emmett's death was not a personal experience for me to hug myself and weep, but it was a worldwide awakening that would change the course of history."**

**-Mamie Till-Mobley**

Till-Mobley, Mamie, and Chris Benson.  
*Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime That Changed America.* New York: Ballantine Books, 2005. 259. Print.



Photo credit: Chicago State University Archives and Special Collections

**Till-Mobley pictured in her college yearbook. She returned to school as a non-traditional student in the aftermath of her son's murder.**

## ABSTRACT

Mamie Till-Mobley was the mother of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old African-American boy who was brutally murdered in the summer of 1955 by white men who, despite confessing to the crime, were never convicted. Our faculty/student collaborative research delved into Till-Mobley's life to learn how she embraced activism as a response to her personal tragedy. We traveled to Chicago in summer 2009 to collect data. During our fieldwork we conducted in-depth interviews with two prominent African-American authors who worked with Till-Mobley, as well as retraced her higher education journey—securing photographs and other related primary print sources from a variety of archived resources. The student researcher will continue with this qualitative research study with a goal of contributing to the body of research regarding Till-Mobley's life and work. Using a grounded-theory approach, the student researcher will continue to immerse herself in the data (published and newly obtained) for continued analysis on Till-Mobley. Our research seeks to lay a foundation of how an activist's response to a tragic event can contribute to broader understandings of patterns of tragedy-linked activism among women and the role, if any, their resilience plays in the process.

## PROJECT OBJECTIVES

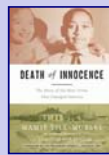
- ❖ Examine the role activism played in Till-Mobley's rebuilding process and personal resiliency.
- ❖ Identify and review academic literature that will provide theoretical grounding and methodological direction to the project.
- ❖ Formulate research questions, informed by our synthesis of the literature, that will enable us to design a research project that will yield significant results and contribute to the body of literature.
- ❖ Engage in fieldwork and identify primary sources in the Chicago area where Till-Mobley lived and worked.
- ❖ Identify potential individuals to interview who could share in-depth information about Till-Mobley's life and activism, through oral histories.

## FIELDWORK PROJECT TIMELINE

DATE	TASK(S) ACCOMPLISHED
May 2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Identify and review academic literature</li> <li>❖ Formulate research questions and interview guide</li> </ul>
June 2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Create theory-informed methodology designed to answer research questions</li> <li>❖ Apply for expedited IRB approval</li> <li>❖ Continued identification and review of academic literature</li> </ul>
July 2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Identify individuals to interview for data collection of oral history</li> <li>❖ Complete fieldwork in Chicago, Illinois</li> <li>❖ Continued synthesis of written literature and oral narratives</li> </ul>



Till-Mobley, Mamie, and David Barr. *The Face of Emmett Till.* Woodstock: Dramatic Publishing, 2006. Print.



Till-Mobley, Mamie, and Chris Benson. *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime That Changed America.* New York: Ballantine Books, 2005: 259. Print.



Adams, Rosemary K., ed. *Chicago History* Fall 2005. Print.

## EXCERPTS FROM FIELD INTERVIEWS

**CHRISTOPER BENSON, J.D**

**co-author of *Death of Innocence*, co-written with Till-Mobley**

*"...you could go two different ways from the tragic experienced that she lived through: you could shut down, completely unplug from life or you can become engaged. And she chose to become engaged. Not only in finding some purpose in her own life, in the horrible tragedy that she endured—but to help...other people do the same thing. She did it in the public schools as a teacher, she did it out on the lecture circuit with everybody she came in contact with. In that grief...she found some meaning in her own life. She binded her grief for a mission and lived that mission for the rest of her life."*  
Benson's interview also delved into her passions for social justice, her role as a teacher of activism in addition to her role as a traditional educator, the importance of local support and organizations that supported her passions which inspired people to thrive across many sectors.



Photo credit: Student researcher, Catherine Emmanuelle and Katherine Rhoades

**Student researcher in Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago, where she interviewed Christopher Benson. In the photo she hold a copy of the book *Death of Innocence* by Mamie Till-Mobley and Christopher Benson.**

**David Barr, Playwright**

**co-author of *The Face of Emmett Till*, co-written with Till-Mobley**

Barr recalled Till-Mobley's personal mission, *"I realize that I'm going to spend every waking moment from this point forward living and fighting this thing to keep another Emmett Till from happening...I want to go to bed exhausted every night, every night. Because at least I know when I close my eyes I've done exactly what I said I was going to do and live that last moment of my life to its fullest."* Barr's interview also included her tenacious commitment to keeping her son's story alive through national-wide travel and public speeches, local speaking groups for school children, and her strong spiritual community. Together these elements in her life contributed to her overall mission addressing race relations in efforts to prevent another tragedy that she and her family endured. Barr also spoke to Till-Mobley's life and its direct impact to spark the Civil Rights movement, which in turn ushered in a new wave of the Women's movement, leading to the current LGBTQ movement, crediting "successes of earlier movements" to each of their achievements.

## PRESENTATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

**This project has recently been presented at:**

- ❖ The 34<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin Women's Studies & 5<sup>th</sup> LGBTQ Conference
- ❖ The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire Women's Studies 222: Women of the American Civil Rights Movement Travel Seminar

**Future Research**

- ❖ Secure qualitative data software and begin coding interviews/texts to continue with grounded theoretical approach for framing this project. This data will lay the foundation to further explore empowering women to use their personal narratives as a catalyst for change in the public sector and policy.
- ❖ Explore the specific impact Till-Mobley had on women activists. Women such as Anne Moody, Fannie Lou Hamer and Gloria Steinem, have all credited Till-Mobley's influence to their lives of activism.
- ❖ Identify alumnae of the of "The Emmett Till Players" and explore the relationship they had with achievements after participating in the public speaking program created and taught by Till-Mobley.
- ❖ These interviews will be stored at the digital repository of Minds@UW and will be accessible to future researchers.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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- ❖ Learning and Technology Services at University of Wisconsin Eau Claire.
- ❖ Christopher Benson, J.D.
- ❖ David Barr, playwright
- ❖ Chicago State University
- ❖ Chicago History Museum
- ❖ Chicago Public Library

## CONTACT FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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