



Commercial Appeal, February 1, 2018 “Take an MLK50 moment to remember Cole and Walker,” by Johnnie Mosley
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Take an MLK50 moment to remember Cole and Walker

Johnnie Mosley, Guest columnist Published 9:54 a.m. CT Feb. 1, 2018



(Photo: Barney Sellers / The Commercial)

As a son of 1968 Memphis sanitation worker, I am not surprised about the many planned activities to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

After all, Memphis is the place where the renowned civil rights leader lost his life while helping the city's [striking sanitation workers](https://www.commercialappeal.com/story/news/2017/07/16/1968-issues-still-haunt-memphis-sanitation-workers-union/475457001/) ([/story/news/2017/07/16/1968-issues-still-haunt-memphis-sanitation-workers-union/475457001/](https://www.commercialappeal.com/story/news/2017/07/16/1968-issues-still-haunt-memphis-sanitation-workers-union/475457001/)), who just wanted to be treated as men.

However, I respectfully ask that Memphians take a moment to remember Mr. Robert Walker and Mr. Echol Cole, the two sanitation workers who were crushed to death in a garbage truck's compactor on Feb. 1, 1968.



A family photo shows Robert Walker when he was about 27. Walker, a sanitation worker, died along with co-worker Echol Cole in an accident that sparked the 1968 sanitation strike in Memphis. (Photo: Chris Desmond / Special to The Commercial Appeal)

Their accidental but gruesome and avoidable deaths -- they were just seeking shelter from the rain -- triggered the strike that began 12 days later and brought Dr. King to Memphis. Their deaths highlighted the undignified plight of hundreds of African-American sanitation workers in Memphis.

Although I never knew these two men personally, I know that their deaths also left a lifetime of pain in the heart of my father, John White, who worked as a sanitation worker for five decades.

My father died in 2005, but if he were alive today, he would say that Mr. Cole and Mr. Walker deserve to be remembered and mentioned in the same sentence with civil rights pioneers such as Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer and Medgar Evers.



1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike marker (Photo: West Tenn. Historical Society)



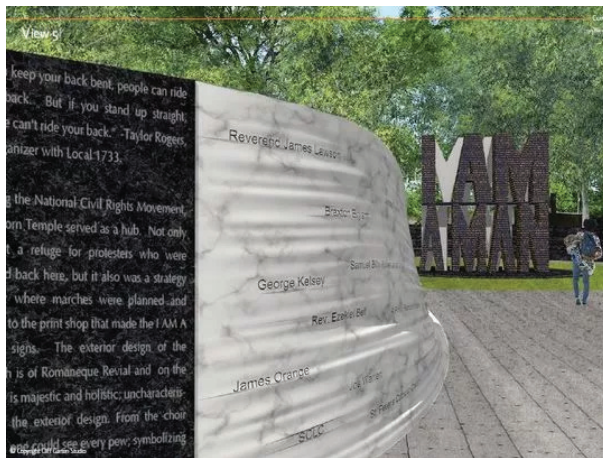
the families of Robert Walker and Echol Cole, my prayers are with you as you ask God to continue to help you cope with the pains of losing your loved ones 50 years ago.

the adult children and grandchildren of the 1968 sanitation workers, I ask that we keep the family members of Mr. Cole and Walker in our hearts and prayers.

Today, Feb. 1, as we pray for and shed tears with the Cole family and Walker family, let us rejoice in the fact that 50 years later, the city of Memphis will be dedicating a plaza in honor of the 1968 sanitation workers.

The I AM A MAN plaza will not erase the painful memories of the garbage strike, the deaths of the two sanitation workers and Dr. King. But it will be a testament to the sacrifices they all made.

Johnnie Mosley is a Memphis native and son of a 1968 Memphis sanitation worker.



Here is the vision from California-based Cliff Garten Studio for a new I Am A Man Plaza in Downtown Memphis. (Photo: Courtesy city of Memphis)