

Daughter's view of Malcolm X

'He was a man. A human being. A father,' says his eldest daughter, Attallah Shabazz.

Malcolm X. The mere utterance of his name seems to drop one on the doorstep of controversy. To some, he was an ex-hoodlum and rabble-rouser, a rogue always on the outside of the civil rights movement but never at its core with real solutions.

To others, he was the liberator of black pride. The fiery, uncompromising spokesman for the black underclass. The "black shining prince," as Ossie Davis proclaimed him in his moving eulogy at Malcolm's funeral.

Maybe he was all of these things. Perhaps he was none. But to the grade-school girl who crouched frightened beneath the shield of her mother's arms the night he was assassinated, only one label seems to fit: He was Daddy.



By Curtis Austin, a Landover, Md., writer and former Dallas newspaper columnist.

"He was my buddy," Attallah Shabazz, the eldest of Malcolm X's six daughters, tells me in a calm voice that barely registers above a whisper.

"He was a man. A human being. A father," she explains, who would often laugh and tickle her and who was fond of leaving hidden love notes for his wife, Betty Shabazz, whenever he left town.

It was August when I phoned her. At the time, I was writing a family column for a Texas newspaper and, with all the interest in Spike Lee's movie about her dad, several questions gnawed at me.

Did it bother her that, in cities across America, there were youngsters everywhere wearing caps and sweatshirts with the "X" logo who hadn't the faintest notion who her father was? And was she still haunted by the memory of seeing her own father gunned down in Harlem's Audubon Ballroom that Sunday in 1965, as she sat on a folding chair

next to her mother, who was pregnant with twins?

She has no problem with the X craze, she says. "It doesn't bother me. Ten years ago, they couldn't wear them. It's a start."

"No," she says, her voice for the first and only time during our interview hinting of a smile. "I haven't seen the movie. I'm waiting like everybody else."

But the delicately worded question about her father's death ushers in a sudden lull. "I remember, but I care not to recount. It's still ever-present."

"I've had 27 years to cry and laugh," she says. "For you to ask me... I was horrified."

Attallah Shabazz never heard the fiery speeches about "blue-eyed devils" that Malcolm gave on behalf of the Nation of Islam.

By 1965, he and Elijah Muhammad had parted ways. And Malcolm — fresh from a trip to Mecca and now calling himself El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz — was forming a vision of black pride that no longer required an all-consuming hatred of whites.

In the years that followed his death, Shabazz says, her mother tried to shield her as she had done that awful afternoon. Betty Shabazz hid the copies of Malcolm X's autobiography that contained photographs of her father's bloodied body.

"But my sister Kubilah and I found them," she says, adding that she and her sister wanted to learn all they could about their famous father.

For the past few years, she and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s daughter Yolanda have traveled the nation, performing in a play they co-wrote called *Stepping Into Tomorrow*, the story of a 10-year reunion of kids who, against the odds, realized their dreams.

But Attallah Shabazz will tell little of her own dreams. Her age and marital status are but a few of the many questions she stamps off-limits. She has her father's lanky frame and his penchant for privacy.

For a brief moment, though,



Source: John Laundis, Black Star; Illustration by Dash Parham, USA TODAY

Who was Malcolm X?

- ▶ Born Malcolm Little May 19, 1925, in Omaha, Neb.
- ▶ Became involved in drugs and was convicted of burglary. He was sentenced to prison in 1946, where he was introduced to Black Muslim movement.
- ▶ Paroled in 1952, he changed name to Malcolm X and became outspoken supporter of Nation of Islam.
- ▶ Suspended by movement in 1963 after saying the Kennedy assassination was "chickens coming home to roost." Formed the Organization of Afro-American Unity.
- ▶ Made pilgrimage to Mecca in 1964 and changed his name to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. He began to soften his stance against whites.
- ▶ Gunned down in 1965 at Harlem's Audubon Ballroom.

the curtain pulls back. "I want people to know about the humanity of my father," she says.

Beyond the near-mythic image of a proud black man full of rage was a flesh-and-blood man who, his daughter says, was both romantic and funny; who would cry sometimes when he was hurt, craved hugs and deeply loved her mother.

For a fleeting moment, Attallah Shabazz seems no different from any other daughter who has lost a dad she loves.

But the curtain never stays pulled back for long: "I don't

know what it's like to be the daughter of Malcolm X," she told a Dallas writer in 1989. "But being the daughter of Malcolm Shabazz gives me strength."

Struggling to close our conversation, I offered the Islamic greeting: "As-salaam alaikum."

But the traditional response, "Wa-alaikum salaam," was never offered back.

Her silence spoke volumes. However noble the intent, she will not be patronized by anyone — white or black. She is Malcolm Shabazz's daughter. And she won't put up with that.