

Community leader reflects on King's sacrifice, impact

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Vernon resident Howard Burrell was 18 years old when the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech during the 1963 Civil Rights march in Washington, D.C.

The speech that King delivered, and the ideals he sought to inspire in all Americans, were the seedlings that helped shape Burrell's life, as well as the lives of millions of other Americans.

"The most significant way I was changed by what Dr. King did was with his idea that progress just doesn't happen by itself; we as individuals have to make it happen, one step at a time," said Burrell, a Centenary College trustee, businessman and former Sussex County freeholder. "I spent my life with that ideal in the back of my mind."

King was born Jan. 15, 1929, in Atlanta. He was the middle child of the Rev. Martin Luther King Sr. and Alberta Williams King. King had an older sister, Willie Christine King, and a younger brother, Alfred Daniel Williams King.

Martin Luther King Jr. Day, a federal holiday that occurs Monday, is observed on the third Monday in January in honor of King's birthday.



Photo by Tracy Klimek/New Jersey Herald - Vernon resident Howard Burrell will speak Jan. 15 about Martin Luther King Jr. at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Sussex County.

King attended Booker T. Washington High School in Georgia but never officially graduated. He entered Morehouse College at 15 and graduated in 1948. He then went on to the Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pa., and Boston University, where he was awarded a doctorate in philosophy.

King married Coretta Scott, on June 18, 1953, and the couple had four children, Yolanda King, Martin Luther King III, Dexter Scott King and Bernice King. King became pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Ala., in 1954 when he was 25.

At age 26, and the pastor of the largest Baptist church in Alabama, he led the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott, which was spurred by the arrest of Rosa Parks, one of King's parishioners.

"When Dr. King became the voice for the Civil Rights movement, Americans looked at him and said, 'Who is this guy? Where did he come from?' because of how well-spoken he was and his ability to motivate people in a peaceful way," Burrell said. "But think about it: Most pastors are well-spoken and polished. What are the odds that Dr. King would be in the right place at the right time to lead the bus boycott and capture the attention of the nation? History provides us with these kinds of people, and Dr. King was one of many."

Burrell recalled growing up in the South during the era of the Jim Crow laws, which mandated segregation of blacks and whites in all aspects of society. Burrell said the sacrifice that leaders such as King, John F. Kennedy and Malcolm X made in their lives changed the world.

"Social change is evolutionary, not revolutionary. It takes many steps and small changes to occur. The way America was when I was a child is completely different than the world my children live in today," Burrell said. "What men like Dr. King and Kennedy did was to help us all take a big step forward."

Toni Zimmer, the first African-American president of the New Jersey League of Women Voters, shares a birthday with King and said she feels strongly about that connection. Zimmer was young when the Civil Rights movement was in full swing but remembered tagging along to demonstrations with her older brother, who was a student at Fordham University.

"He (King) did so much to let us know we had rights and shouldn't be treated unfairly," she said. "He let us know we should be able to make the same wages, and go into the same restaurants as everyone else. He helped dissipate that dark era."

Burrell said the progress that King helped bring about was important for Americans as a whole, as much as for African Americans as a group.

"If Dr. King just helped change things for the African Americans in the United States, then we would not be the great nation we are today; we would not be able to compete with the world. To limit someone based on skin color or gender would prevent so many great individuals from making our world better," Burrell said. "What leaders like Dr. King did was to call upon our nation to begin to think in a certain way, to not judge others based on race, creed or gender."

In August 1963, King led a march of more than 250,000 people of diverse ethnicities on the Mall in Washington, D.C. It was at this march that King delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech that has been a rallying cry for equality over the decades.

"What Dr. King did was a small step for African Americans, and a giant leap for our nation," Burrell said. "The founders of our country knew that even the U.S. Constitution was imperfect, but it was the desire to continue to try to create a more perfect union that set our nation apart. That is what leaders like Dr. King gave to our nation."

On March 29, 1968, King went to Memphis, Tenn., in support of the black sanitary public works employees, represented by AFSCME Local 1733, who had been on strike since March 12 for higher wages and better treatment. Six days later, on April 4, as King stood outside his motel room door, an assassin's bullet ripped through his chest and killed him. King was 39 when he died.

"I remember being shocked. Not surprised, but still shocked when I heard the news," Burrell said. "I was in the Air Force and held the rank of second lieutenant stationed in California when Dr.

King was killed. My commanding officer called me into his office and sat me down to give me the news. That is how I heard about it."

In 2010, Zimmer had the opportunity to visit the Martin Luther King Junior Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta, as well King's boyhood home and Ebenezer Baptist Church, where King preached.

"You could really feel his spirit in those places," Zimmer said.

Burrell said it was King's dedication and sacrifice to grab the opportunity that history presented to him and not let go that made his sacrifice important.

Zimmer credited King with paving the way for her and others to hold positions they would not have been able to in the pre-Civil Rights era landscape.

"If not for Dr. King, I may not have been able to become the League's first African-American president," she said."

If you go ...

Howard Burrell will speak Jan. 15 about the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Sussex County, 1 W. Nelson St., Newton

Phone: 973-579-7210

Services will begin at 10 a.m.



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