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Liz Lindblom York (left) stands backstage with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and IWU President Lloyd Bertholf prior to King's appearance before a packed house at Illinois Wesleyan's Fred Young Fieldhouse. [Listen or read his 1966 speech](#)

Alumna Recalls Bringing Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to Campus in 1966

Jan. 12, 2007

It was a memorable moment in Illinois Wesleyan University history. On Feb. 10, 1966 — during the height of the American civil rights movement — Martin Luther King, Jr., accompanied by his wife, Coretta, spoke on campus, drawing a massive crowd, causing controversy and raising students' interest in his cause. The visit came two years after King's acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize and two years before his assassination in Memphis, Tenn.

What is perhaps less well known is that it was an Illinois Wesleyan student who was primarily responsible for arranging King's visit. Liz Lindblom York, class of 1967, was then a junior history major. Serving as the Student Senate's convocations chairman, she decided King would be a perfect speaker. "He was very controversial and his message was very timely," said York.



Liz Lindblom York

Growing up in a Scandinavian and Italian immigrant neighborhood in Chicago, York said she wasn't directly exposed to the civil rights movement. But during a vacation to the southern United States, she remembers seeing "a lot of injustices" which informed her decision to embrace King's message of nonviolent change.

After deciding to invite King, York received help from a classmate, Eldridge Gilbert '67, whose father knew the civil rights activist's home phone number. When she called the number, York was "dumbfounded" when King answered his own phone.

"When I called him and asked him to come and speak, (King) jumped at the chance," she said. "He never hesitated. He knew that he had to reach everybody with his message, and he knew what the campus was like," with many of the students at the time living sheltered lives, distant from the civil rights movement. "He knew this was where he needed to bring his message."

Prior to making that call, York sought and received permission to invite King to campus from Lloyd Bertholf, who was IWU's president. Although she remembers Bertholf saying he anticipated the visit might cause controversy, York wasn't prepared for the amount of negative phone calls and letters she received as the date of King's arrival approached.

"There were people at that time that did not want him to come on campus," she recalled. "This was a very controversial figure and a very heated time." Though she didn't feel threatened at the time, "looking back on it, I should have been," York said. "As you mature, you realize there are bad things that can happen." However, King brought his own security guards and, in the end, York said, "there was plenty of police and protection."

What surprised York the most about King's visit was the amount of interest it created on campus. Around 3,500 people attended his speech, given at the Fred Young Fieldhouse, where major campus events were held from 1962 until the mid-90s, when the building was replaced by the Shirk Center and later demolished.



Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. brought his message of change to campus in 1966.

"The Fieldhouse was literally packed with people," York said. The first rows of seats were filled with media representatives "from all over." York herself introduced King, and also had a chance to speak with him privately before his talk. "You can't imagine the thrill," she said.

But the evening's highlight was the speech itself. "Everyone was spellbound," York said. "He was almost mesmerizing in the way that he spoke." The heart of King's speech was his message of nonviolence, what he told the audience he considered "the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their

struggle for freedom and human dignity."

King concluded his speech with a display of his faith in America: "With this faith we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last, free at last — thank God almighty, we are free at last.'"

"He had a picture of what he wanted for the future," said York, whose own future would be affected by what she experienced in 1966. "What it taught me is: don't be afraid to ask a question," she said, recalling her phone call to ask King to speak. "The biggest thing he taught me is that someone can make a difference," she said. "You can take a stand and not be afraid."

Throughout her life, York says she has tried to champion causes close to her heart and is ready to work for them. She is currently treasurer of the University South Foundation of the University of Arizona South, and serves on the board of directors of Cochise Victim Awareness and the Citizens Advisory Commission for the city of Sierra Vista, Ariz., where she resides. York believes her daughter, Blythe, has followed in her footsteps. While a student at Trinity University in San Antonio, Blythe helped develop a minor in women's studies, which was not being offered at the time.

"My daughter got the message: try, ask, and maybe you can accomplish what you want to do," said York. "What Illinois Wesleyan taught me is that each person can make a difference. Maybe it's not going to happen, but don't be afraid to try," she said. "Don't be afraid to stand up and say something."