



Winter 12-17-2009

20th Anniversary of Festival Offers Time to Look Back at King Speeches on Campus

Rachel Hatch
Illinois Wesleyan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hatch, Rachel, "20th Anniversary of Festival Offers Time to Look Back at King Speeches on Campus" (2009). *News and Events*. 5907.

<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/5907>

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

December 17, 2009

Contact: Rachel Hatch, (309) 556-3960

20th Anniversary of Festival Offers Time to Look Back at King Speeches on Campus

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – For two decades, voices have been lifted in song as a tribute to the late civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. This year marks the 20th anniversary of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Gospel Festival on the campus of Illinois Wesleyan University (link to news release) on January 18.

Founded by the late Corine Sims and her husband, the Rev. James E. Sims, the festival found a home at Illinois Wesleyan, and attracts gospel choirs from all over the state. The University was seen as a fitting place for the festival, as it was the place that King graced twice.

“[In the early 1990s then-Illinois Wesleyan] President Minor Myers, jr. said Wesleyan would be the perfect place to host the event, because of Dr. Martin Luther King , Jr. spoke at the University,” said Barbara Sims Malone, daughter of James and Corine. “He saw the festival as a special opportunity to invite the community to Illinois Wesleyan.”

King came to speak at Illinois Wesleyan at two important junctures during his short but illustrious life. The first in 1961, when standing on the cusp of international recognition, and the second in 1966, when his reputation as a proponent of non-violent protest for the Civil Right Movement was known throughout the world. King’s visits to Illinois Wesleyan reveal the evolution of the Civil Rights Movement and his place within it.

1961

In the late 1950s, King was known mostly as the preacher who coordinated the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955, which came only a year after the Supreme Court rejected the concept of “separate but equal” in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case. Respected for his policy of non-violent protest, King had been named *Time Magazine*’s Man of the Year in 1957 and a Gallup Poll proclaimed he was one of the “most admired people” in the world.

When King first came to Illinois Wesleyan in 1961, he was still two years away from stepping out onto the stage of the March on Washington and into the eternal pages of history,

with his “I Have a Dream” speech.

(<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihaveadream.htm>)

Illinois Wesleyan senior Dennis Groh was serving on the Student Senate’s Religious Activities Committee in 1961. As one of the organizers of Religious Emphasis Week, Groh helped bring King to campus to address the annual banquet celebrating the Religious Activities Commission.

“No one had any idea when he came in 1961 that he would become the equivalent to the Ghandi of the western world,” said Groh, who gave the invocation at the banquet where King spoke after spending the day on campus. “We knew we were in the presence of someone special. But America was a pretty big place and a pretty closed place.”

No official transcript of King’s 1961 speech to the Religious Emphasis Banquet exists in the IWU Archives at The Ames Library, though there is a copy of the event program that is autographed by King. His presence drew media coverage, as well as the 500 people who attended the dinner.

Senior Nancy Hitchings Danou, a nursing major, previewed King’s 1961 visit with a story in the campus newspaper, *The Argus*. “This, then, is Martin Luther King – a man who never forgot to ‘love his enemy.’ He made suffering a virtue,” Danou wrote in an article titled “America’s ‘Freedom Fighter’ to Address RAC Banquet.”

The speech, titled “Facing the Challenge of a New Age,” was said to have focused on the great advances in technology, and how those advances offered hope for a greater equality in society. In the Bloomington newspaper, *The Pantagraph*, King is quoted as saying that, “Trite but true technology made of his world a neighborhood. ...And so we are challenged to make this neighborhood a brotherhood.”

During the speech, former chair of the Religion Department James Whitehurst predicted King would do great things. “Dr. Whitehurst leaned over to me and said, ‘This is someone special,’” said Groh. “King had a loving charisma and real power with an audience that was almost an invitation with each word.”

Groh would return to campus from 1996 to 2006 as the University Chaplain and professor of archeology and humanities, but recalls his time at Illinois Wesleyan as a turning point for civil rights in the nation. “There is a sweetness at having been there in what felt like the beginning,” he said.

1966

After the 1963 March on Washington, King became a symbol of the Civil Rights Movement, and of efforts for non-violent protest throughout the world.

In 1964, he became the youngest man to receive a Nobel Peace Prize at the age of 35. King received more than 20 honorary degrees, including those from the University of Chicago, Boston University, Howard University, Oberlin College and Yale University. He was honored with more than 125 citations for his peaceful work.

King saw more of his efforts come to fruition as the 1965 Voting Rights Act was passed in Congress.

In 1966 King returned to Illinois Wesleyan with the eyes of the world upon him. This time an enthused crowd of more than 3,500 met King with a standing ovation as he entered Fred Young Fieldhouse to give a speech for the Founders' Day Convocation (link: <http://www.iwu.edu/newsrelease06/KingSpeech1.shtml>) in February.

In a 2006 interview with *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine*, alumna Liz Lindblom York '67, a former Student Senate member, spoke of her idea to have King return to campus. After receiving approval from then-University President Lloyd Bertholf, York called King at home, securing his number from a classmate whose father knew King. 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," York said in 2006. "He never hesitated. He knew this was where he needed to bring his message."

By 1966, King was expanding the Civil Rights Movement to the northern part of the United States. "When we heard about civil rights, many people thought it was a regional problem that just affected several southern states," said Richard Muirhead '66, who was president of the Illinois Wesleyan Student Senate at the time King returned to campus. "In many ways, racism was an even greater problem in the north."

Many students were excited to see the man who was awakening a sense of justice in them, said Muirhead. "When we looked at Illinois Wesleyan's campus in the 1960s, there were only a handful of black students, and it was not the most welcoming place to people who were not white. Much of the Greek system was still segregated, and no one questioned it," he said. "Some of us were beginning to question it, to question how we recruited as a campus, and Dr. King had a lot to do with that before he ever set foot on campus."

Even within the “Wesleyan Bubble,” there was an awareness and anticipation for change. “It was more than change on a racial front. Women were demanding to be treated with greater respect as well,” said Pamela Buchanan Muirhead ’68, who now teaches at Illinois Wesleyan as an associate professor of English. “There was kind of a tense atmosphere on campus, a spirit of knowing things have to change, and we, the students, have to be responsible for changing things.”

Associate Professor Muirhead served on the Student Senate in 1966 with her future brother-in-law, Richard. She said the idea of a visit from King filled her with excitement, as well as fear. “There were already fears for Martin Luther King’s life,” she said. And as one of only a few African American students at Illinois Wesleyan at the time, Muirhead felt a heightened sense of anxiety. “There was never a fear for my physical safety, but there was a sense of feeling vulnerable, being one of few,” she said.

Even before King set foot on campus, several Student Senate members had received hate phone calls. Richard Muirhead recounted the 2 a.m. calls with people asking how he could bring a “communist organizer” to campus. “When you are 21 years old, it’s pretty shocking to hear that, but I wasn’t frightened. I guess I was too dumb to be frightened,” he said, adding that he now regrets not talking more about the calls with fellow students. “We just dismissed the callers as ignorant people. We should have talked about it. It would have been a great teaching experience.”

Security surrounding the 1966 speech reflected the fears for King. “It was the first event I’d ever attended that had police with guard dogs,” Associate Professor Muirhead said. The speech was recorded by local radio station WJBC, and announcers noted the large amount of security surrounding the Fieldhouse, both from university officers from IWU and Illinois State University, and county sheriff deputies.

The speech itself highlighted a rare occasion for people in the Bloomington-Normal community who believed in civil rights to gather outside the church, said Associate Professor Muirhead. “There really had not been many events where people who supported civil rights could get a look at each other,” she said. “A great excitement filled the room before he came in to speak, and I think a lot of people were looking around to see who else was there.”

Richard Muirhead said he still recalls hearing King that day. “I have a copy of the speech on my computer,” he said from his office at Mount Mary College in Wisconsin where he serves as the director of International Studies. “It still gives me goose bumps. You can hear his voice when you read the words that still ring true today.”

This time, King's speech explored the progress of the movement. "There is a desperate, innocent, poignant question on the lips of hundreds, thousands, yea, millions of people all over the nation and all over the world," said King. "It is the question, are we really making any progress in race relations?"

King pointed to the positives the nation had seen – enfranchisement of many thousands of black citizens through the Voting Rights Act – and the negatives they had endured – the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). Associate Professor Muirhead noted that members of the KKK spread hate leaflets on the cars parked at the Fieldhouse the night of King's 1966 speech.

King's recurring theme, however, resonated with the idea that there was much work to be done. "The extreme optimists and the extreme pessimists agree on at least one point, and that is that we can sit down and do nothing in this all-important area. The realists in race relations try to answer the truths of two opposites, while avoiding the extremes of both," said King. "We have come a long, long way, but we have a long, long way to go before the problem is solved."

As his voice echoed across the Fieldhouse, King drew upon an elegance akin to poetry that so often marked his words. "We have broken loose from the Egypt of slavery, and we have moved through the wilderness of separate but equal, and now we stand on the border of the promised land of integration," said King.

Associate Professor Muirhead also remembers the night he spoke. "He was one of the most articulate African American speakers I had ever heard," she said. "He knew his audience. His speaking style was eloquent, but it wasn't a performance. His content was purely academic, and his arguments rational. He was an amazing speaker."

Two years later, Martin Luther King was assassinated on April 4, 1968. Associate Professor Muirhead's future husband called her to let her know. "He kept saying, 'They shot him. They shot him,'" she said. "And there was just an overwhelming sense of despair."

A candlelight vigil was held on campus to honor King. "His death was very personal to every person who worked for civil rights," said Associate Professor Muirhead, who heard King speak again at her hometown church in Chicago, and had taken part in a housing march in the city. "Martin Luther King was by no means the first martyr of the movement, but he was the first who represented the thought that there could be real change. No matter how slowly it might come, there was that opportunity for change. His death was felt everywhere."

Richard Muirhead was stationed in Peru with the Peace Corps in 1968. He said he was struck by how King's death impacted people around him, thousands of miles from his home in

the United States. “His presence gave birth to a lot of things,” he said, noting Peruvians were coming to terms with their own Afro-Peruvian slavery in 1968. “King had an impact around the world.”

It wasn't until 1986 that the nation began to observe Martin Luther King Jr. Day, a national holiday celebrated around King's birthday on January 15. Four years later, Corine Sims instituted her idea of a gospel festival to honor King. Starting in 1991, the Gospel Festival began where King once stood, in the Fred Young Fieldhouse. By 1992, the Gospel Festival moved to Westbrook Auditorium in Presser Hall.

Sims died in August of 2007. Her passing made the 18th year of the festival a double tribute to both King and Sims. At the end of the festival, every choir came to the stage to sing Sims' favorite hymn, “Precious Lord,” at the closing of the festival.

“My mother, Corine Sims, had a dream, and that was empowering our community with a vision to keep the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream alive,” said Sims Malone. “Her dream, as well as that of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., should live forever.”