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Martin Luther King, Jr.National Holiday

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December 10, 1996

Contact: Bob Aaron, 309/556-3181*Martin Luther King, Jr. National Holiday***Yolanda King, Civil-Rights Leader's Eldest Daughter,
to Speak at Illinois Wesleyan, Jan. 18**

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**7th Gospel Festival Slated for Jan. 20
7-Hour Extravaganza of Music, Dancing, Poetry Reading,
Art-Essay Contests to Honor Memory of
Nobel Peace Prize Winner**

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--The eldest daughter of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., will speak prior to a fellowship dinner at Illinois Wesleyan University, Jan. 18, as part of festivities marking the national holiday commemorating the slain civil-rights leader.

Actress, producer-director, and lecturer Yolanda King--who is featured in the upcoming Rob Reiner film, "Ghosts of Mississippi," about assassinated civil-rights leader Medgar Evers--will speak at 5 p.m. in Westbrook Auditorium, Presser Hall, 303 E. University St., Bloomington. The 6:30 p.m. fellowship dinner will be in the Main Lounge of IWU's Memorial Student Center, 104 E. University St., Bloomington.

Tickets for the fellowship dinner and King's address are \$15 for adults, \$8 for students, and \$3.50 for children under age 12. Tickets are on sale at the Main Desk of IWU's Memorial Student Center or can be purchased by calling Corine Sims at 309/828-4602. Information about various ticket plans is contained in the sidebar attached to this news release.

King's speech and the fellowship dinner are part of the 7th Annual Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., National Holiday Gospel Festival, co-sponsored by the United Community Gospel Singers of Bloomington-Normal, a non-profit organization, and Illinois Wesleyan. Sims is executive director of the gospel singers group.

The Jan. 20 gospel festival, which runs from 2-9 p.m., will feature an address by education advocate Silas Purnell, former director of Chicago's Ada S. McKinley Community Services, Educational Services Division and a recipient earlier this year of an honorary Doctor of Laws degree from Illinois Wesleyan. Admission to the gospel festival, which will take place on the National Holiday honoring King, is free. For more information about the gospel festival, contact Sims.

YOLANDA KING

Yolanda King straddles the artistic and civil-rights worlds. An accomplished actress, she is

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featured in director Rob Reiner's new film, "Ghosts of Mississippi," scheduled for national release in January. Whoppi Goldberg and Alec Baldwin co-star in the film about Medgar Evers, who was murdered in 1963.

Taylor Branch described Evers' murder outside his Jackson, Miss., home this way in his epic chronicle of the civil-rights movement, "Parting the Waters": "Finally home, Evers stepped out of his Oldsmobile carrying a stack of NAACP sweatshirts stenciled 'Jim Crow Must Go,' which had made poor sales items in Mississippi's sweltering June. His own white dress shirt made a perfect target for the killer waiting in a fragrant stand of honeysuckle across the street. One loud crack sent a bullet from a .30-'06 deer rifle exploding through his back, out the front of his chest, and on through his living room window to spend itself against the kitchen refrigerator . . . 'Please, Daddy, please get up!' cried the children, and then everything fell away to bloodsmear, primal hysteria."

Many of Yolanda King's other stage and movie roles reflect her interest in social change.

"While it is imperative to actively challenge the forces that deny human beings their right to a decent life," she said, "one must also stimulate and alter the hearts and minds of both the privileged as well as those who have been too long denied. Within the arts lies this power."

She portrayed Rosa Parks in the NBC-TV film, "King," with Paul Winfield and Howard Rollins. She also played Betty Shabazz, wife of assassinated civil-rights leader Malcolm X, in the film, "Death of a Prophet," with Morgan Freeman. King also had a cameo role in the movie, "Hopscotch," starring Walter Matthau. She also appeared in this year's HBO special, "America's Dream."

King was a founding member of Christian Theatre Artists and for 10 years she served as co-founding director of NUCLEUS, a company of performing artists dedicated to promoting the arts.

In 1990, King formed Higher Ground Productions. Its first project was "TRACKS," a multimedia theatrical production celebrating her father's philosophy of non-violent social change. She starred in the production for four years as it toured the country. Higher Ground's most recent production, "Achieving the Dream," premiered at the 1996 Atlanta Centennial Olympics and is slated for a national tour.

In 1995 and 1996, King was a visiting professor, teaching in the theatre department of New York City's Fordham University.

King maintains an active schedule, speaking throughout the United States and Europe. From her home in Los Angeles, she is working on several television and film projects.

She was born in 1955 in Montgomery, Ala., two weeks before Rosa Parks, a black seamstress, refused to give up her seat to white passengers on a crowded 36-seat Montgomery bus,

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triggering the civil-rights movement that ultimately desegregated the South. She is the oldest child of the late Martin Luther King, Jr., and Coretta Scott King.

Yolanda King's interest in the theatre became apparent at age 8, when she wrote a play in which she directed her reluctant siblings. The play was performed for her parents and friends.

By age 12, she had choreographed two musicals and directed several theatrical productions.

These early initiatives in the arts led King to the Actor's and Writer's Workshop in Atlanta, where she studied theatre and appeared in productions.

King is a graduate of Smith College in Northampton, Mass., where she received a bachelor of arts degree with honors in theatre and African-American Studies. While at Smith, she co-directed the Student Theatre Workshop. King earned a master's in fine arts degree in theatre from New York University, performing in various off-Broadway and other productions.

Among her honors, King has been named an Outstanding Young Woman of America. She also serves on the board of directors of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Inc., the official national memorial to her father. She is a founding director of the King Center's Cultural Affairs Program and a lifetime member of the NAACP, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Habitat for Humanity, and the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, where her father and grandfather led the congregation.

SILAS PURNELL

Operating out of a basement office in Chicago's Dearborn Homes housing project, Silas Purnell has helped more than 40,000 African-American men and women to enroll in about 200 colleges and universities nationwide.

Asked why he works in a poverty-stricken neighborhood just blocks from where he was born in 1923, Purnell said in a 1992 interview it's because "that's where the people are."

Purnell is executive director of educational services for Ada S. McKinley Community Services.

Over the years, he has established working relationships with hundreds of educational institutions to assist black and other minority students, as well as non-minority students, to gain admission to public and private, historically black and predominantly white, large and small colleges and universities.

Purnell was honored by Illinois Wesleyan University's Minority Alumni Network at Homecoming '92 for his lifetime contributions to helping extend educational opportunity to youth. He

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was introduced at the ceremony by Dr. Ansel Johnson '81, an optometrist, whose first acquaintance with IWU was on a bus trip to the campus organized by Purnell.

In an interview prior to receiving his IWU award, Purnell said: "Our students are doing some of everything--medicine, dentistry, engineering, and law--and many of them came right out of the projects."

Purnell has a strong faith in education. "Education," he said in a 1992 interview, "gets the kids off the street. Education is the key to all our problems. It helps solve problems like housing, unemployment, teen pregnancy, and crime. But kids need money to stay in school--and many young people who want to go to school don't think it's possible since they don't have money."

Purnell received an honorary degree from IWU last February at a Founders' Day Convocation, which focused on concern for children.

Purnell resigned in 1967 from the Coca-Cola Company, where he had been a marketing manager for a dozen years, and spent a year as a volunteer with Ada S. McKinley Community Services. This experience fueled his determination to get minority youth off the streets, encourage them to finish high school and, if qualified, counsel and support their efforts to attend college.

Purnell has logged more than 100,000 air miles in some years visiting colleges, giving lectures and fundraising.

He is known for his "no nonsense" approach to education, counseling students based on what they need and not necessarily what they believe they want. However, Purnell has his "soft" side and a reputation of going beyond the call of duty, helping less advantaged students with anything from bus fare to eyeglasses.

THE GOSPEL FESTIVAL

Corine Sims launched the Gospel Festival in 1991 as a way to perpetuate Martin Luther King, Jr. 's legacy. This is the seventh time Illinois Wesleyan has co-sponsored the event.

The Gospel Festival is expected to attract numerous churches and choirs from Chicago, Bloomington-Normal, and elsewhere, as well as soloists, singers and dancers. Area elementary and junior high school students will receive awards for outstanding work in art, speech, and essay writing on themes associated with Martin Luther King, Jr.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. AND IWU

When Martin Luther King, Jr., visited Illinois Wesleyan in 1961, he addressed an audience of more than 500 at the annual Religious Emphasis Banquet. He also met with students in their classes

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and more informally as part of meal functions.

King returned to IWU four and one-half years later as a national leader of the civil-rights movement and the recipient of the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize; he donated the honor, valued at \$54,600, to the civil-rights movement.

In 1966, he addressed an audience of more than 3,000 at the Fred Young Fieldhouse, declaring: "We must build a greater America. It cannot be built on bombs. It cannot be built on riots. We must work to change the climate that makes for bitterness that causes individuals to turn to these types of self-destruction."

Three of Dr. King's children--Yolanda, Martin III, and Bernice--have brought their father's message of non-violent social change, social justice, and brotherhood to IWU. Vernon King, the slain civil-rights leader's nephew twice addressed the gospel festival.

KING AND THE CIVIL-RIGHTS MOVEMENT

King first caught the nation's attention in 1956, when at the age of 27 he organized a boycott of the public transportation system in Montgomery, Ala., as a protest against racial discrimination.

King--the longtime champion of civil rights, school desegregation, and non-violent social change--is perhaps best remembered for the Aug. 28, 1963, Freedom March on Washington, D.C., which brought about 250,000 participants and much of the civil-rights movement's leadership to the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. King in his now-famous "I have a dream" speech, said, "I have a dream that one day, on the red hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood . . .

"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character . . ."

King was assassinated at age 39 by a sniper in Memphis, Tenn., on April 4, 1968, sparking civil unrest in many cities. He was in Memphis to support a sanitation workers' strike. His April 9 funeral in Atlanta was attended by an estimated 75,000 people. One week after he was gunned down, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the 1968 Civil Rights Act into federal law. On March 10, 1969, James Earl Ray was convicted of assassinating King and sentenced to 99 years in prison.

President Ronald Reagan signed legislation Nov. 2, 1983, establishing a federal holiday on the third Monday of January to honor the assassinated civil-rights leader. King was the first person honored with a federal holiday since George Washington's birthday was so designated.

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls about 1,900 students in a College of Liberal Arts, College of Fine Arts, and a four-year professional School of Nursing. A \$15 million athletics and recreation center opened in the fall of 1994; and a \$25 million science building opened in the fall of 1995. The

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\$4.6 million Center for Liberal Arts--a facility housing 60 faculty offices, six classrooms, and other facilities for social science, humanities business and economics, and interdisciplinary studies' faculty --is slated to open next August, as well as a new \$6.5 million residence hall, accommodating 114 students in suites. The Carnegie Commission for the Advancement of Teaching promoted Illinois Wesleyan to a "Baccalaureate I" institution in 1994, a classification that places it among 161 highly selective National Liberal Arts Colleges in the annual *U.S. News & World Report* rankings. *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges*, another respected college guide, rated IWU "highly competitive (+)" in its latest edition.