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Martin Luther King, Jr., National Holiday '98

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Dec. 17, 1997

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Martin Luther King, Jr. National Holiday '98

Klan Foe to Speak at Illinois Wesleyan, Jan. 17; Morris Dees, Celebrated Civil-Rights Attorney, To Headline Fellowship Dinner

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8th Annual Gospel Festival Honoring Martin Luther King, Jr. Slated for Jan. 19

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--He took on the Ku Klux Klan and it cost the hate group \$7 million. He won a \$12-million verdict against Nazi-like Skinheads. His 1996 book, "Gathering Storm," explores the dangers of the radical militia movement. And, his exploits against some of the nation's most notorious racists resulted in his office being torched and made him an assassination target.

Civil-rights leader Morris Dees, co-founder and chief trial counsel for the Montgomery, Ala.-based Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), will address a fellowship dinner at Illinois Wesleyan University, Jan. 17, as part of festivities marking the national holiday commemorating slain civil-rights leader Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Dees' address will be followed by the fellowship dinner. Ticket information for Dees' address and the dinner is contained on the attached fact sheet.

Dees' speech and the fellowship dinner are part of the 8th 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. Corine Sims is executive director of the gospel group.

The Jan. 19 Gospel Festival, marking the 30th anniversary of King's assassination, will run from 2-9 p.m. and admission is free. For more information about the Gospel Festival, which will take place on the National Holiday honoring King's birth, contact: Corine Sims, 309/828-4602.

Civil-Rights Champion

Dees is associated with some of the nation's most celebrated civil-rights cases:

- When Ku Klux Klan members lynched an African-American man in Mobile, Ala., in

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1981, Dees and SPLC launched a lawsuit. They sued the Klan for inciting violence, winning a \$7 million precedent-setting judgment.

- In 1990, Dees won a \$12.5 million verdict for the family of an Ethiopian murdered by Skinheads in Oregon.

Most recently he has been educating people about America's radical militia movement. His 1996 book, "Gathering Storm: America's Militia Threat," explores the dangers these groups represent. Dees is the author of two other books: an autobiography, "A Season for Justice," and "Hate on Trial: The Case Against America's Most Dangerous Neo-Nazi," which chronicles the trial and \$12.5-million judgment against white supremacist Tom Metzger and his White Aryan Resistance group for their responsibility in the beating death by Skinheads of a young black student in Portland, Ore.

Dees' exploits have been the subject of television and feature films. A made-for-television movie about his life, "Line of Fire," aired on NBC-TV on Jan. 25, 1991. Actor Corbin Bernson portrayed Dees. In the 1996 feature film, "Ghosts of Mississippi," which tells the story of murdered civil-rights leader Medgar Evers, Dees is portrayed by Wayne Rogers.

Southern Poverty Law Center

During the civil-rights movement, Dees aided minorities through the courts. In 1971, he co-founded the SPLC, funding the nonprofit group through direct-mail appeals. SPLC is known for its battles against segregation and hate groups. Its mission is to win equal rights for minorities and poor people by taking high impact, high-risk cases that few lawyers had the resources to tackle. Most recently, the Center has become internationally known for its success in devising novel legal strategies to cripple extremist activity.

Seventeen years ago, the Center funded "Klanwatch" in response to a resurgence in organized racist activity. It also developed "Teaching Tolerance," SPLC's well-regarded education project.

To help educate youngsters about the civil-rights movement, Dees pushed for construction of the Civil-Rights Memorial. Designed by Maya Lin, the monument, bearing the names of 40 men, women, and children who lost their lives during the civil-rights movement, was dedicated in 1989 in Montgomery, Ala., scene of civil-rights campaigns led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

By 1997, more than 500,000 individuals nationwide had become SPLC supporters. Organizations such as the American Bar Association, National Education Association,

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American Civil Liberties Union, NAACP, and the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith have recognized the Center as a leader in anti-bias litigation and education.

Dees' Background

Dees, born in 1936 in Shorter Ala., was a successful businessman. He sold cotton mulch in high school, birthday cakes in college, and mail-order books after law school. At age 32, Dees and his partner sold their highly successful mail-order business to the Times-Mirror Corp., parent of the Los Angeles Times.

The son of an Alabama farmer, Dees made a commitment to the civil-rights movement at a snowed-in Cincinnati airport.

In his autobiography, Dees wrote: "When my plane landed in Chicago, I was ready to take that step, to speak out for my black friends who were still 'disenfranchised' even after the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Little had changed in the South. Whites held the power and had no intention of voluntarily sharing it . . .

"I had made up my mind," Dees continued. "I would sell the company as soon as possible and specialize in civil-rights law. All the things in my life that had brought me to this point, all the pulls and tugs of my conscience, found a singular peace. It did not matter what my neighbors would think, or the judges, the bankers, or even my relatives."

Dees also turned his attention to politics, raising money for Democratic presidential candidates, revolutionizing political fundraising. In 1972, Dees was George McGovern's finance director, raising more than \$24 million from 600,000 small donors for McGovern's White House campaign. This was the first time a presidential campaign had been financed with small gifts by mail.

A graduate of the University of Alabama Law School, Dees has received numerous awards for his work at the SPLC. Trial Lawyers for Public Justice named him "Trial Lawyer of the Year" in 1987. He received the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Award from the National Education Association in 1991.

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 eighth 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.

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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 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 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.

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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 2,000 students in a College of Liberal Arts, and its Schools of Music, Theatre Arts, Art, and Nursing. Since 1994, these facilities have been added to the IWU campus: a \$15 million athletic center, a \$25 million science building, a \$6.8 million residence hall, and a \$5.1 million liberal arts center. The Carnegie Commission for the Advancement of Teaching ranks Illinois Wesleyan a "Baccalaureate I" institution, a classification that places it among the 159 highly selective National Liberal Arts Colleges. IWU won the 1997 NCAA Division III men's basketball championship.