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Martin Luther King Jr. is remembered as a civil rights activist who opened many doors



Larry and Katrina Strong, Katherine Manuel and Bronson Vice Mayor Beatrice Roberts lead the Martin Luther King, Jr. parade in Bronson Saturday singing 'This Little Light of Mine, I'm gonna' let it shine.' The theme of their T-shirts was 'Never Lose Hope.'

Story and Photos

By Terry Witt Senior Staff Writer © Jan. 15, 2018 at 7:47 p.m.

BRONSON -- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was remembered Monday (Jan. 15) in Bronson as a towering spiritual and civil rights activist who opened the door for African Americans to participate as equals in American society.



Participants in the Martin Luther King, Jr. parade gather for a word of prayer in the Bronson Post Office parking lot before the start of the event.

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The Williston Jr. ROTC Unit marches in the Bronson parade toward their destination at a linear park near the Levy County Health Department. Temperatures were just above the freezing mark Monday morning.

King, assassinated on April 4, 1968 as he stood on the balcony of a motel in Memphis, Tenn., was the face of a civil rights movement that brought down the Jim Crow laws mandating racial segregation in the South.

Segregation was practiced throughout the United States in that era.

King, a Baptist minister, worked with a group of like-minded ministers to organize non-violent protests that raised awareness of the unfairness of segregating public facilities.

“People don’t realize what he sacrificed to get us where we’re at,” said Bronson Vice Mayor Beatrice Roberts. She was in the fourth or fifth grade when public schools in Bronson became integrated for the first time in 1965.

She had previously attended the all-black Bronson Elementary School. The three portable classrooms at the former BES, each housing two grades, were moved to the all-white public school in Bronson.

“It was scary. You didn’t know what to do. The teachers were nice, pretty nice,” she said.

King was honored on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. Local government offices on all levels, including the Levy County Courthouse and Levy County School Board along local city and town halls were closed for the national holiday.

Among those attending the Bronson celebration was Jerry Mongo, one of 13 black students selected to attend Bronson High School in 1964 in preparation for the official desegregation of all Florida public schools in 1965.

Mongo, Robert Patterson and former Bronson Town Councilman Aaron Edmondson

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were among the 13 who attended Bronson High School a year before the school was officially desegregated.

Bronson, like most southern cities, was segregated in the Jim Crow era. Public bathrooms and business bathrooms were segregated. Water fountains were segregated. Many restaurants were segregated.

The restaurant that operated where Julie's Café current stands employed black cooks, but black residents were not permitted to enter through the front door of the restaurant.

They could buy their food as take-outs at a side window, according to Roberts and Elijah Williams.

It was in this segregated atmosphere where and when Mongo entered the all-white Bronson High School as one of first 13 black students.

"Huh!" he chuckled when asked what it was like. "It was different. It was kind of strange. You felt a little bit of the tension, you know, the animosity. There were only 13 of us. That gave them an opportunity to, I guess, acclimate themselves to us to and us to them. The next year when total segregation came around they were used to us being there."

Mongo said government officials came to his home and the homes of the other 12 black students who attended Bronson High School a year in advance of total segregation, to ask parents if they wanted to participate by having their children attend the school a year early.

The day King was assassinated there was chaos in Chiefland and Williston high schools, Mongo said, though not as much in Bronson. He said a lot of the white kids were going around saying it was a good thing that King was murdered, "and it wasn't a good thing for us."

Like others attending Monday's celebration, Mongo said King opened a lot of doors, but he said his grandchildren find it hard to believe what it was like when he was growing up as a child.

"I tell my grandkids about that now and they think it's kind of a fairy tale. They ask me was that for real granddaddy? So they don't believe it's really true," Mongo said.

Mongo said there were other civil rights activities taking place in the United States when King started his ministry of non-violent social change, but he said King focused on the poor and ending social, economic and racial inequality.

When King began presenting a broader message about the plight of the poor, and the economic and social inequalities around the world, Mongo said, that is when King was assassinated.

King is the civil rights leader that most people talk about, Mongo said. He was the most prominent.

"It came out of our history, and that history is his story," Mongo added.

Pastor Johnnie Jones of Fountain of Life Church in Williston, the only pastor to attend Monday's event in Bronson, said a week ago he was wearing a gold T-shirt that carried the theme of this year's MLK celebration, "Never Lose Hope," when his 2-year-old granddaughter Jaden asked about the image of King on the shirt.

"I was able to talk to her and say, in as elementary way as I could put it, that it was because of him that we are able to do the things we are doing, and live where we live and work where we work and eat and shop where we eat and shop," Jones said. "That young generation is curious about that image."

But Jones said King must be remembered as more than a historic figure.

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“If we don’t continue to talk about him and his contributions, he will become an image and not a real figure,” Jones said.

Jones was born in 1970, two years after King was assassinated. He didn’t live through the civil rights era but has read extensively about King and his non-violent movement. He has read King’s inspirational speeches. He believes King was divinely appointed for that era and time in the nation’s history. Jones wonders what the nation might look like today if not for the change brought about mainly through King’s leadership. He wonders if the United States might look more like South Africa in the days of apartheid.

In King’s life, Jones said there many civil rights activists who believed as he did in non-violent social change and fought for the same things, and some who were involved in the civil rights movement before King, but said King was the voice of his generation.

“He was able to articulate a clear vision for non-violent social change for the civil rights movement and that’s the difference,” Jones said.

Roberts said there has been change in the era since King mounted his non-violent civil rights movement, but the reality for most African Americans is that society is much like it was before King. Black people can enter through the front door of restaurants and use the same bathrooms as whites in the modern era, but they are still viewed as being different than whites and discrimination continues to be a problem.

She remains suspicious about an incident in 1948 in which her late uncle Charles Greenlee, 16 years old at the time, and three other young black men slightly older than him were accused of raping a white woman in the town of Groveland.

Roberts’ uncle spent 11 years in state prison for the crime before attorney Thurgood Marshall, a future U.S. Supreme Court Justice, stepped in and managed to free him. Roberts said they were never told the reason why her uncle was freed, but she said the family did receive apologies from state lawmakers in Tallahassee for the injustice committed against him.

Roberts said the apologies fell well short of exoneration but her uncle was able to move to Nashville and establish a successful air-conditioning business. He returned to Bronson only to visit family.

“When I think about Martin Luther King, I wonder what would have happened to my uncle if he (King) hadn’t marched in that March,” Roberts said.

She added that one of the three men arrested with her uncle in 1948 was gunned down on a trip between the jail and Lake Butler, allegedly for trying to escape. She said the man’s body was found riddled with 400 bullet holes.