

Humbles Hall  
Virginia University of Lynchburg  
January 21, 2008

### Martin Luther King, Jr. Legacy

Good morning everyone. I feel very honored that Judith Johnson and the Martin Luther King Committee have invited me to speak on the theme of Martin Luther King's Legacy. I see we have the mayor, council members, school officials, the president of VUL, and other dignitaries present. What a great crowd we have here this morning to honor Martin Luther King, Jr.

Time is passing, so I'll try and keep my remarks brief

They say that America is a country of immigrants. I too am an immigrant, originally from Africa. My husband and I came to this great country in 1956. It has been good to us. This can be contrasted with all those Africans who came to this country after suffering the cruel middle passage. Then they were enslaved and labored hard to form the bedrock on which our country was built. They have been fighting and struggling for their freedom ever since. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a great leader in that struggle, one of the greatest of all time. However, before him, there were other great leaders and doubtless heroes will emerge in the future to lead us in that ongoing quest for Peace and Justice for all people.

It is so appropriate that we are meeting today in this Historic Black College, founded by African Americans just 20 years out of slavery. Martin Luther King was a product of such an historic Black College, - Moorehouse College in Atlanta. The Virginia University of Lynchburg is a school rich in history that has also produced outstanding scholars, leaders, teachers and ministers. It has seen dark days in the past but now, under the leadership of its president, Dr. Ralph Reavis and a dedicated Board of Trustees it is witnessing a rebirth. It is hoped that everyone here will join in the effort to rebuild the school into, once again, being a beacon of higher learning on Lynchburg's Seminary Hill.

The 1950s, 60s and 70s saw a time of particularly turbulent change throughout the country, but particularly here in the South. Everywhere blacks were pushing for change, and whites were resisting. The NAACP was active on the legal front and voter registration. Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party sought a more militant approach. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. a young Baptist minister with his roots in the South sought change through peaceful resistance. Through his charismatic leadership and personal courage he inspired many people of both races and brought a wave of change throughout the nation. He, himself, was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi and the teachings of Jesus Christ to use non-violence to achieve his goals of racial justice and peace.

There are adults living today who do not remember the Civil Rights Struggles of the 1960s and '70s. Adults who were not yet born or who were small children during those turbulent times. Adults who are now in their forties who have children, and some even grandchildren. Many of you here today did not experience those times. I am so glad you are here. I realize that with all our present-day concerns it is easy to forget the past. But forgetfulness comes at

a price. As the saying goes, *if we forget our history and the lessons learned, we are destined to repeat it.*

So, is up to us older folk who were alive then and do remember, to pass on the story. ---And the younger folk need to listen so they can pass on the story to their children and grandchildren. The civil rights struggle is a story of shame and courage, of fear and sacrifice, inspiration and hard work, of community and vision, of respect and love and eventually of triumph. We must not forget.

One way that a group of dedicated individuals is trying to preserve a record of those times is through the Legacy Museum of African American History on Monroe Street here in Lynchburg. Here you will see the main exhibit “The Fall of Jim Crow in Central Virginia” that tells the story, through pictures and text, of the Civil Rights Struggle in Lynchburg and surrounding counties from 1954 to 1981. I encourage you to visit the museum: bring your children, your friends, your Sunday school, you will be enriched. We all need to be involved in bringing to light and preserving these missing pages of history

So, I will tell my story. I will be naming some names but I can't name everyone who played a role in the Movement here in Lynchburg, it would take so much time we would have to stay not only for breakfast, but lunch and dinner as well. So please be understanding if you or a friend of yours who worked for Civil Rights, is not mentioned.

I will begin with my arrival in Lynchburg in 1959 with my husband, Hans and two small children, -- two more were to be added in the next few years. Some of you may remember those times: (my grandchildren think it was the time that dinosaurs roamed the earth!) we still had a black and white TV, no dishwasher and no air conditioning --as for computers and cell phones, they were completely unheard of.

Lynchburg, at that time, seemed like a quiet backwater, in the foothills of the lovely Blue Ridge Mountains. It was a city of churches, folk entertained in their homes, there were no bars and very few restaurants -- after 9:00pm only the Texas Tavern was open downtown. Pitman Plaza had not yet been built, downtown was where all the retail action was.

But there was something wrong with the picture.

There were people in the city, -- around 30% of the population at that time, who were by law not allowed to fully participate in the activities of the city. At that time they were called Negroes or Colored and some people even referred to them by a more derogatory title. They were not a separate species, they were American citizens, the only observable difference between them and the dominant white population was the color of their skin. They were relegated to inferior school buildings, they were not allowed to drink from the same water fountains or go to the public restrooms that whites used. They were not allowed to try on clothes at retail establishments. They could not sit down at restaurants or eat at lunch counters that were reserved for whites. They could not sleep in area hotels. They could not use the only public library in town or attend the colleges in the area except for the Virginia Seminary and College. Their doctors were not allowed to treat their patients in the hospitals.

The races were kept separate in all aspects of life and blacks were kept in a subservient role by law and by social custom.

But with all that, the black community thrived, entrepreneurs developed businesses, schools with limited resources educated minds and encouraged creativity. Music flourished, churches held the community together. Though many of the most talented had to leave the city to find opportunities for employment.

Lynchburg, as you know, is a city slow to change. The Civil Rights Bill of 1954 ruled separate school systems unconstitutional (one of the plaintiffs in the case was the R. R. Moton School in neighboring Prince Edward County) but in 1959 segregation was still the law in Lynchburg. Virginia was a massive resistance state and Virginia Governor Thomas B. Stanton, had declared, following that 1954 Supreme Court decision, "*I shall use every legal means at my command to continue segregated schools*". Other southern states also resisted change. It took some concerned black parents to bring suit against the Lynchburg School Board before an acceptable integration plan was developed. It included busing and was approved by federal Judge Michie in 1961. In 1962, Linda Woodruff, Owen Cardwell, Jr., Cecelia Jackson and Brenda Hughes, became the first African Americans to attend the all white E. C. Glass High School.

Many people in Lynchburg were inspired by Martin Luther King's leadership. There were protest marches, some people were jailed for their activism, some lost their jobs but while there was confrontation with the powers that be, there was no violence such as in other cities like Danville. This was remarkable since the Carter Glass newspapers spouted inflammatory racist views in their twice-daily issues.

As blacks pressed for justice and equality, there was swift counter reaction from the white establishment, many of whom feared change. Some of the local events of that time are depicted on the large three-paneled work I painted "Lord Plant My Feet on Higher Ground". You can see a photographic reproduction of the painting behind me. The original is hanging in the Legacy Museum.

The three panels portray the significant local people, places and events of the 1960s and 1970s as I saw them. Emphasis is given to the flowing, forward movement of the people and the interconnectedness of all elements of the black community in their struggle for justice. Many leaders are named but it took the efforts of everyone, working in their own way, to bring about change. Local landmarks significant to the struggle of those times can be seen in the background and help to tell the story.

You may well ask "Why are there no white folk on the picture?" While several members of the white community in Lynchburg assisted in the Civil Rights Movement, there were many in power that resisted change. Except for the Rev. Jerry Falwell and his congregation the established white churches did not openly denounce integration but sadly, for the most part they were silent and did not exhibit any positive leadership either. Rev. Bev Cosby and the Lynchburg Covenant Fellowship and the Unitarian Church were notable exceptions. Individual clergy such as Herb Barks, Nathan Brooks and Herb Moore were also allies in the

struggle. The Rev. Jack Teeter, priest of the Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd, was arrested for sitting with black friends in the segregated Court House. The nuns at Holy Cross, also worked for racial harmony. However, it took the leadership of a group of businessmen, headed by Harold Leggett to publicly confront the Lynchburg News and Advance on their racist policies. Others who showed courage in their support of the Movement included Randolph Macon Woman's College President, Bill Quillian, anthropology professor Ken Morland, legislators Elliot Schewel and Leighton Dodd and some college students. However, I chose to limit the scope of the painting to the positive efforts of the African American community.

The contributions of Youth and Labor form the backbone of the left-hand panel. Many young people, frustrated by the slow pace of change, pressed the leadership to use a more confrontational approach, - exemplified by David Cox's raised Black Power fist. However, Lynchburg Community Action Group, headed by Haywood Robinson and Junius Haskins, provided constructive outlets for them through summer youth employment and recreation programs,--- though their efforts were rewarded with a cross burning on Diamond Hill.

Towards the panel foreground are clustered the first African American students to integrate E. C. Glass High School in 1962. Lynchburg schools only fully integrated in 1970.

In the 1960s there were very few employment opportunities for African Americans. Bates Ford is shown picketing the local A & P grocery store for jobs. This resulted in Garnell Stamps' sister Doreatha being hired as the first black checkout clerk at the main supermarket and Laura Williams being hired at the 12<sup>th</sup> Street location. Walter Fore represents organized Labor participation. In 1964, Leggett's Department Store was the first retail establishment to hire black sales clerks - Gloria Johnson Hunter was the first.

#### *One More Step ---Moving up to Higher Ground*

An important source of information on meeting places for civil rights demonstrations was the radio. Fletcher Hubbard is shown in his role as announcer for WJJS, and also Robert Goins, (otherwise known as Madd Ladd) who started a pirate radio station in his basement while still in high school.

#### *On Our Way, Moving up to Higher Ground*

Theodore Burton, Rev. Virgil Wood, and Dr. G. F. Jackson, Sr., were charter members of the Lynchburg Improvement Association that among other activities, brought an omnibus suit against the Lynchburg City Schools.

#### *Moving on up to Higher Ground*

The institution of the Black Church was a prime mover in the community's struggle for justice and equality. Court Street and Diamond Hill Baptist Churches are representative of churches in Lynchburg from which issued forth the inspired leadership and committed foot soldiers of the Movement.

### *On the Move to Higher Ground*

Shown on the center panel are some of the major leaders of the Movement at that time: O. C. Cardwell, Sr., M. W. Thornhill, Jr., Rev. James I. Brooks, Hazelle Boulware, Georgia Barksdale, Charles M. L. Mangum, Mary Payne, Junius A. Haskins, Jr., L. Garnell Stamps, and Rev. Haywood Robinson, Jr. They and others had the courage to step forward and take the risks necessary to forge change during that volatile period.

### *Leading the Way to Higher Ground*

Hayes Hall (since demolished) of the Virginia Seminary and College forms a background for college presidents and faculty. Students participated in sit-ins and other demonstrations to open up public facilities.

### *Moving up to Higher Ground*

During the late 1950s boycotts were conducted against businesses down town to protest their racially exclusionary practices. Seminary student Lanksford Hankins was spat upon while picketing against the Piggly Wiggly Grocery store on Main Street. In the right background are the stools of Patterson's Drug Store where, in 1960 and 1961, Virginia Seminary students, including current VUL President Dr. Ralph Reavis, tried to receive service and were refused. They went to jail.

### *Moving up to Higher Ground*

Not all progress was made through direct confrontation. The right-hand panel shows educators such as Dr. C. W. Seay, (principal of Dunbar High School), Pauline Weeden Maloney, and Carl Hutcherson, Sr. (the first black member of the School Board). There were doctors, lawyers and businessmen and women who also made contributions. The poet Anne Spencer is shown, in the upper left, beside her garden cottage, Edankraal.

In the background are the Jones Memorial Library, (for whites only) and the Lynchburg General Hospital where the local African American physicians were not allowed to practice. Dr. R. Walter Johnson is shown with two of his tennis protégés, Arthur Ashe and Althea Gibson whom he trained on his private tennis court in Lynchburg. Public tennis courts and country clubs were closed to them because of their race.

Until the late 1960s the City of Lynchburg operated separate recreational facilities for the two races. On the 4th of July 1961 Olivet Lee Thaxton challenged that rule by peacefully leading several youngsters to the Miller Park (whites only) pool to swim. In response, the pool was immediately closed by the authorities and subsequently all three public swimming pools were permanently filled in with earth. Deprived of safe swimming facilities, three young boys drowned while swimming in the James River.

### *Making Sacrifices to Reach Higher Ground*

Voter registration was a key to increasing political power Delores Fowler, Anne Wesley, Clarice Banks and Yvonne Ferguson worked valiantly in that area.

*Moving up to Higher Ground*

Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968, but his work goes on. If we look all around us we can see his legacy, it may be only partly realized but we are on the way. Just look around you – blacks and whites eating together in a public facility – that would not have been possible here in Lynchburg before the 1960s. Integration in the workplace has moved beyond tokenism, we have had two black mayors, our school superintendent is black. Virginia was the first state to have a black governor.

All the marches, confrontations, and strategizing that the civil rights activists engaged in did produce results. They opened the doors for the likes of Jim Mitchell, former professional football player with the Detroit Lions, to come to Lynchburg in 1981 and successfully head up the Jim Mitchell Auto Group. “He could tackle any deal!”

And now we have Lynchburger, Leland Melvin, Astronaut, he has taken the *Higher Ground* metaphor to extreme lengths, -- he plans to leave the earth completely.

We still have, and need, our seasoned warriors, Garnell Stamps, Walter Fore, and Danny McCain to keep holding our city and state institutions accountable.

But the younger generations are moving up in different ways. Young, educated African Americans are moving back to the South. Scientists like Mario Thomas and other professionals such as William Goins and Ron Shultz are making significant contributions to our community and the world.

We are all benefiting from Martin Luther King’s legacy. Even Liberty University, the cherished creation of erstwhile segregationist Jerry Falwell, now has more African Americans enrolled than all the area four-year colleges put together. And opportunities for women have opened up as a direct result of the consciousness raised through the Civil Rights movement.

But now is not a time to be complacent and think that Martin Luther King’s dream has been fulfilled. Many of our national leaders still think that violent wars can bring peace. Here at home, the playing field is still not level. But, now, under the leadership of Mayor Joan Foster the city is bringing together more than 600 people to openly discuss the issues of race and racism. So, hopefully, with this major effort, through good will, open dialog and building on the work of the past, we will continue to move on up to Higher Ground.