

Spirit Moved Press, Too...

"You should have been there," is the only way that I have been able to describe last week's Martin Luther King Birthday rally in Washington, D.C.

Anyone who has ever been on a picnic and watched with curiosity as millions of ants converged on forgotten or dropped bits of food, could vividly imagine the site that greeted our chartered bus when we arrived at the rally on Jan. 15.

The area around the Washington Monument, where the rally took place was fenced in with chain-link, backed by steel scaffolding.

Buses from all over the country, at last count 380, deposited people from all walks of life on sidewalks near the monument where vendors were hawking their wares, selling everything from recorded copies of King's "I Have a Dream" speech to Martin and

By Donna Oldham
Staff Writer



City Editor Donna Oldham covered in last week's MLK rally in Washington, D.C.

Stevie buttons.

Once inside the rally, it was next to impossible to leave.

In the fenced-in area, Washington Park Police and city police patrolled the area in riot gear...that's right, riot gear.

The park police while surveying the area, had no idea what commotion, 250,000 loyal, screaming and emotional black people could make.

I have never seen a crowd that didn't move. Oh sure, they danced, sang, swayed to the music and did their own thing, but, the crowd never moved, and I was there all day.

Being the enterprising journalist that I am, I attempted to maneuver and fast-talk my way closer to the stage where all the stars and dignitaries were. People in a crowd could care less that I or any other journalist there had a job to do.

With camera around my neck and camera bag under my arm, I tried pressing closer and closer. People stared, they pushed me to the right and to the left, one woman hit me with her cane because I stepped on her corns. Fifteen minutes later, I was in the same place that I started out.

My next strategy was to set up my camera equipment right where I was.

Wrong. The immense crowd actually had my hands pinned to my sides, I couldn't move.

The camera around my neck was pressed into my chest, and my nose was imprinted into the coat of the man standing in front of me, who had no qualms about telling me what I could do with my camera and my nose.

My next strategy was to find the press gate.

Secret service agents, FBI agents, city and park police were stationed on the press gate that let V.I.P. limousines in and out.

After showing every press, credit and membership card I owned, along with my own secret service press pass, I was finally allowed backstage to witness what will be one of the most memorable things I will ever see.

I have never been one to be impressed by movie stars or big names but the people who turned out for the rally would put any who's who to shame.

The weather was cold and snowy. Even in ski gear and insulated boots, I was aching, and frozen and the thought of getting back on the warm bus and going home was looking better and better all the time.

The stage area was surrounded by limos and again park police on horses and FBI were checking everything except your birth certificate to let only the "true" reporters and press in.

By the time they decided that Winston-Salem, N.C., and the Chronicle were indeed real, the stage was filled to capacity and several officials of the rally feared that the already crowded fixture was loaded beyond its limit.

Well, sorry has never stopped me to date, and it didn't Thursday.

My journalism professors once told me that to be a dedicated journalist, you have to have talent, ambition and drive, be resourceful and imaginative. Above all, they said, you must be crazy.

So, with that in mind, I scaled the 12-foot scaffolding to get on the stage, through a tear in the canvas-like tent that covered the performers and dignitaries.

Photographers have been called a ruthless bunch, and the rally brought out everyone's true nature. Willing to do anything to get close to Stevie Wonder and company, reporters and photogs were being thrown off the stage by the scruffs of their necks one by one to keep them from bothering Wonder and the others. When the officers finally got to my seat, they took one look, shrugged their shoulders and moved on.

When the excitement finally settled and I was able to get a good look at where I was, I saw the unbelievable sight of thousands of my brothers and sisters laughing, crying, shouting, angry, dancing and praying...all for Martin Luther King.

Some held banners professionally hand lettered, others clutched worn bedsheets lettered in magic marker, now runny and wet; but, no matter where they were from or what they were searching for in the way of fulfillment that day, we were there for a common cause to celebrate Martin Luther King's birthday.

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