



Martin Luther King Jr. conducts a radio interview while journalism students from Bennett College look on. The Civil Rights leader visited the Greensboro college in 1958.

Bennett releases King tape

BY DAMON FORD
THE CHRONICLE

GREENSBORO — Loretta McKee vividly remembers the night Martin Luther King, Jr. came to Bennett College.

"People were just taking it in stride at the time," she said. "No one realized just how big it was because we were all into Civil Rights. When you're a part of history sometimes you don't know you're making it."

On Feb. 11, 1958, more than 1,000 people packed into quaint Annie Merner Pfeiffer Chapel while hundreds of others stood outside in the cold to hear the 29-year-old King speak.

On that night, McKee, a 1956 graduate of Bennett, sat on the right side of the steamy church.

"I was really standing because it was so crowded," she said. "I could look over (the balcony) and see his head. He commanded the audience-he gained their attention."

Because of the efforts of school officials, Bennett College recently celebrated the 41st anniversary of King's visit to the campus by replaying the tape of his speech to the public last Thursday.

The tapes are now on sale as part of a university fund raising effort.

At least 500 people attended the event during the morning and evening sessions, including those like McKee who saw and heard King speak four decades ago.

With scenes of King and other Civil Rights icons from the documentary "Eyes on the Prize" flashing across the projector screen, everyone — young and old listened intently to the words of the slain civil rights leader.

During the 72 minute speech, King touched on a number of areas including the importance of blacks registering to vote.

"What I'm saying is this that we must gain the ballot and use it wisely," he said. "I've come to see recently that one of the biggest steps that the Negro can take is that short walk to the ballot box...Don't put it all on resistance, it's true that in my state of Alabama Negroes aren't registered in many instances because they can't register-the resistance is strong-because registrars refuse to register...But I don't think that's true in Greensboro, N.C. Many Negroes aren't registered because they are too lazy to go down and get registered," King said amid a thunderous applause.

He also talked about the need for good leadership.

"We must continue to develop wise, courageous and sincere leadership," King said. "This is a need all over the south and all over this nation."

"Leaders who will guard the extremes of hot headedness and uncle Tomness ... Leaders who somehow have the vision to see the issues and have the courage to stand there."

At this point in his life King had not become the historical icon that many school books talk about or streets across the nation are named for.

King had left the cozy confines of his fathers church in Atlanta, to become the pastor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Ala.

He quickly became known around the city and state for helping push the year long bus boycott in Montgomery and co-founding the Southern Christian Leadership Conference of which his son, Martin Luther King, III is president, today.

For C.C. Draghn hearing King again gave some perspective to that eventful night in 1958.

"The significance is to acquaint those who weren't around about black history (and) refresh or stimulate the minds of those of us who forgot or tossed (the message) to the side," he said. "I think it (was) very helpful to young people to see it and hear what was going on at the time."

Draghn is so very grateful that Dr. Willa Player, president of Bennett College in 1958 volunteered the facilities of the African American women's school.

King was originally invited by the Greensboro NAACP branch to come to the city but fear of violence kept the doors of local churches and other black owned venues closed.

Organizers thought about holding the event at N.C. Agricultural and Technical State University was looked at but concern that funding would be cut off from the state supported school lead officials to back out. Player balked at the notion Bennett was too small to host the event.

"Bennett College is a liberal arts school where freedom rings so Martin Luther King, Jr. can speak here," she proclaimed at the time.

With that one bold move history was made and many of the people under the sound of Kings voice left the campus chapel challenged.

Included in that group was a

student from Dudley High School by the name of Ezell Blair, Jr. (now Jibreel Khazan), who was so moved by King's speech that two years later he and three other freshman at A&T sat down at the segregated lunch counter at F.W. Woolworth in downtown Greensboro sparking the nationwide sit-in movement.

In the mind of Dr. Charlotte Alston, Bennett College's provost, Kings speech still has relevance today.

"Although that message from King was delivered in 1958, the core of his concern as I see it continues to be with us," Alston. "Therefore it behooves all of us to continue to join in the fight for equality, the fight for peace, the fight for justice for all people-you see it's not over."

"I sometimes believe that many of our people believe that there isn't anything else to do, but there is. The celebration this evening was a reminder to all of us that there are roads yet to be traveled."

For information about obtaining copies of the King tapes, call (336) 370-8646.

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