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“It is impossible to look into the wide arena of American life without noticing a real crisis in race relations.”

60 years later: A look back on MLK's visit to Peddie



Guest speakers Morton Goldfein '59, the Honorable David B. Mitchell '63 and Arthur E. Brown, M.D. '63 remember Martin Luther King Jr. on Founders Day.

Time magazine features Dr. King on the cover the same week he speaks at Peddie.



Remembering Dr. King's visit to Peddie

Nearly sixty years to the day after Martin Luther King Jr. spoke to Peddie students in the Ayer Memorial Chapel, the Peddie community gathered on Founders Day to honor the life and legacy of Dr. King.

On February 20, 1957, King, then a 28-year-old Baptist minister, spoke to Peddie about race relations in the United States. One of the first African-Americans ever to speak at the school, King addressed the crowd without a script or notes, and spoke of a "real crisis" precipitated by southern resistance to the Supreme Court's decision to outlaw segregation.

"There comes a time when people grow tired of being stepped on by the iron feet of oppressors and the struggle will continue until the oppressed people are free," he said.

In early 1957, in the wake of the months-long Montgomery bus boycott, King was emerging as a national figure in the civil rights movement. That same week, Time magazine featured King on their cover.

Just 41 days before his visit, terrorists bombed four black churches and the homes of bus boycott leaders and ministers in Montgomery. A dozen sticks of smoldering dynamite left on the porch of King's home failed to explode. Despite this violent response to the bus boycott, King kept his appointment at Peddie, and spoke to the assembled school about non-violent social resistance.

"This non-violence is based on a faith in the future, a faith that believes that the universe is on the side of the forces of justice," said King.

Guest speakers Morton Goldfein '59, Arthur E. Brown, M.D. '63 and the Honorable David B. Mitchell '63 reflected on King's visit to Peddie during the Founders Day ceremony on February 17.

Mitchell was 11-years-old in 1957, and had only arrived at Peddie two weeks before King's visit. He was one of two African-American students on campus.

Mitchell remembered: "Dr. King said those years ago in this Chapel, the enemy is not individuals and their specific evil deeds. You must challenge injustice whenever and wherever it's presented. You must do so with love for your fellow human beings. And you must do so nonviolently."

A second presentation took place on Monday, February 20, the exact anniversary of King's address, when Kenton Kirby '99, Fernando Perez '01 and Dar Vanderbeck '04 honored King at Chapel and spoke about their journeys since Peddie.

English teacher Pat Clements, who organized the event, said that by honoring King on Founders Day, the school "transferred the significance of that event to a fresh generation of Peddie students."

A look back from those who were there ...

Michael Horowitz '58

I had heard of Martin Luther King Jr. before he came to Peddie, but at the time I thought he was just a young Baptist preacher coming to a then Baptist school. I was not expecting him to have the presence that he had.

As co-editor of the Peddie News, I had the opportunity to interview Dr. King that day. There was a kind of aura around him. Even back then, you felt that you were meeting and listening to someone who was going to leave his mark. I was taken with King's sincerity and strength. He was very serious for a 28-year-old. I was amazed that he was only 11 years older than I was. Everything that happened afterwards I could understand having listened to him.

What King said that day was powerful. He opened my eyes to the severity of issues going on around the country. Back then, we did not think about prejudice at all. Until I became a reporter, I did not realize how society was not as together as I assumed it was.

Of all the people I have interviewed over the years ... Nixon, Humphrey, Kissinger ... King remains one of my fondest memories. Invariably every Martin Luther King Jr. Day, I wind up telling the story of when I interviewed him at Peddie. If I could interview King today, I would ask him, "What would you suggest we do to get closer to a kind of world that you imagined?"

Richard Turner '60

When Martin Luther King Jr. spoke at Peddie, we all knew it was a special occasion, but I doubt that many of us realized just how special it was. I had no idea at the time just how great a person he would become.

Dr. King's words to us made a big impression on me because, in my mind at the time, blacks were not any different

from whites. I was 16, and living and going to school in the North. I had black classmates before Peddie, and at Peddie, and they were well respected. I think we were somewhat aware of the problems blacks were having in the South as it was in the news, but it did not seem to affect us being in New Jersey. I did not realize until he spoke just how oppressed blacks were in the South. King made it clear that my impressions were nowhere near reality, and that was the message I walked away with that day.

If King were here today, I would say "thank you" for all he did for humanity.

Enrique Sabal '61

I had never heard of Martin Luther King Jr. before his visit to Peddie. I arrived at the school in 1955, an 11-year-old with no knowledge of the English language.

By the time Dr. King gave his lecture at the Ayer Memorial Chapel, I was fluent in English and so I was able to grasp his amazing magnetism and virtuosity with words, which he said with an obvious display of force and passion. At the same time, I did not fully comprehend the problems he was talking about in his speech. On the one hand, we did not have racial problems in my native country of Venezuela. Moreover, the issues he spoke about did not affect the everyday life of a not yet 13-year-old student at a prep school in a Northern state.

King's ability with words had an impact on me and made me wish that over time I could acquire his eloquence. I think it set the foundation for me to earn first place in the 1961 extemporaneous speaking contest, coached by the unforgettable Harold Van Kirk.

If King were here today, I would congratulate him for his vision and philosophy of human and constitutional rights for people of all races. It is markedly applicable to Venezuela



The Peddie News covers Dr. King's visit to Peddie in their March 1, 1957 issue.

today, not because of racial intolerance, but because of the severe and brutal constraints of our citizen's constitutional rights to free political thought and action. Venezuelans are "growing tired of being stepped on by the iron feet of oppressors, and a struggle will continue until oppressed people are free." Today, all around the world, there is still a need to further understand and live by King's philosophy and vision.





“The tension here and the tension anywhere while we find races are confronting conditions of injustice, the tension is not so much between races, not between Negro people and white people, but the tension is at the bottom between justice and injustice, between the forces of light and the forces of darkness, between the forces of good and the forces of evil.”

Excerpts from Dr. King’s address at Peddie on February 20, 1957

It is impossible to look out into the wide arena of American life without noticing a real crisis in race relations. Now this crisis has been precipitated on the one hand by the determined resistance of the reactionary elements in the South and to the Supreme Court’s momentous decision outlawing segregation in the public schools. This resistance has often risen to ominous proportions. And as you well know, many states in the South have risen up in open defiance.

The legislative halls of the South ring loud with such words as interpositions and nullification. And also, a modern version of the Ku Klux Klan has arisen in the form of so-called “respectable” White Citizens Council. The methods of citizens council are the methods of intimidation to actual economic reprisals against Negroes and white persons of goodwill who dare take a stand for justice.

And so all of these forces have conjoined to make for massive resistance and the crisis has been precipitated on the other hand by the radical change in the Negro’s evaluation of himself. It is probably true to say that if

the Negro continued to think of himself in inferior terms and patiently accepted injustice and exploitation, there would be no crisis in race relations. But it is at this very point that the change has come, for the Negro throughout America and throughout the South has a new sense of dignity and destiny, a new sense of self-respect.

Against Oppression

All of this means that the struggle will not soon disappear. It is sociologically and historically true that privileged classes do not give up their privileges without strong resistance. It is also sociologically and historically true that once oppressed people rise up against oppressions there is no stopping point short of full freedom. And so realism impels us to admit that the struggle will continue until justice is a reality for oppressed and disinherited people all over the world.

Now, I am delighted with the fact that the struggle will continue. The great question which confronts the oppressed people all over the world is this: How will the struggle for justice be waged? I think that is the most significant question of our civilization.

It seems to me that if the oppressed people in general, and the American Negro in particular, falls victim to the dangerous philosophy of violence, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and an endless reign of meaningless heritage of endless chaos. And so, violence is not the way.

There is another method, there is another way to achieve justice and we might refer to it as the method of non-violent resistance — the method of passive resistance or whatever word you choose to use. There is a way to achieve justice without violence. This method of non-violent resistance was made popular in our generation through the work of Mohandas K. Gandhi of India, who used it to free his people from the domination of the British Empire. And it seems to me that this is the method that oppressed people all over the world should use rather than the method of violence and tragic hatred.

At times, a non-violent resistor finds it necessary to indulge in boycott as merely a means to know that a boycott is not an end within itself. He realizes that a boycott is merely a means to awaken a sense of shame within the oppressor. But the end is reconciliation, the end is redemption, the end is to change and transform the soul of the oppressor.

And so the aftermath of nonviolent resistance is the creation of a better community wherein the aftermath of violence is the creation of tragic bitterness. Another thing that can be said about this method of non-violent resistance is that it attacks forces of evil rather than individuals who might be caught up in these forces. The nonviolent resistor seeks to defeat evil rather than persons who may happen to be victimized with evil. And that is a great distinction: We have the evil deed rather than the person who happens to be evil.

As I like to say in Montgomery, “The tension here and the tension anywhere while we find races are confronting conditions of injustice, the tension is not so much between races, not between Negro people and white people, but the tension is at the bottom between justice and injustice, between the forces of light and the forces of darkness, between the forces of good and the forces of evil.”

And so, if there is a victory, if there is a victory for the forces of integration in America, it will not be a victory for the 16,000,000 Negroes, but it will be a victory for justice, a victory for truth, a victory for the forces of light. The aim must always be to defeat evil and not individuals who may happen to be caught up in the system of evil. Our aim in Montgomery and throughout the South is to defeat injustice and not persons who may happen to be unjust.

Creative Goodwill

I realize that all talk about loving those who oppose you and loving those who are seeking to defeat you can be a sort of empty type of thing. We can be indulging in empty words, if we do not understand what we mean by love at this point. When I think of love at this point, I am thinking of understanding goodwill toward all men. Not a sentimental type of love, not an affectionate type of love, but understanding, creative goodwill for all men.

This is a faith that will keep us going amid all the experiences of life. This, in brief, is the method of non-violent resistance. God grant that all men struggling for freedom and justice will reach out for this method, that they will never fall victim to the temptation of using the method of violence and indulging in hate campaigns. And I predict that, if men and the oppressed peoples of the world will use this method of non-violence and will continue to struggle with love in their hearts and with understanding goodwill, in a few years we will be able to see a new world — a world in which men will be able to live together as brothers — a world in which men will have the dignity and worth of all human personality — a world in which men will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks — a world in which men will come to see the real meaning of God’s kingdom, and we will be able to live together as brothers — in the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of man.

This is altogether possible, and God grant that it will come through determination to work with understanding goodwill and love in our hearts and our determination to stand up with non-violent spirits. ■