# *2019 NCSBN Leadership and Public Policy Conference* - Still Chasing Dr. King's Dream Video Transcript

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**Event**
2019 NCSBN Leadership and Public Policy Conference

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**Presenter**
Tom Houck, Civil Rights Activist; Personal Assistant & Driver for Martin Luther King

- [Tom] It's an honor to be here, and excuse me for sitting down. But many of you out there know when you have back problems what it's like, and over the last three or four weeks, I've had a serious back problem, and so that's why I'm sitting down and not standing up because usually I'm standing up and I'm speaking out.

I was nine before I was seven. I was actually born in Cambridge, Mass, which is not very much a working-class city these days unless you have a million or a million and a half dollars for a house or an apartment. But I grew up part of my time in Somerville, Mass, and about six years old. Somerville, by the way, used to be an Italian and Irish working-class suburb of Boston.

There were a few black folks there. There were a few Puerto Ricans there, but by and large, it was an ethnic neighborhood and a poor one at that. So, you might say, "Well, how did this white boy get into the civil rights movement?How did this white boy get involved?" Well, I didn't come from an intellectual family or a college family. My mother was a waitress.

My father was a machinist when he was an employee. We grew up in a three-story, not three-story, three, with the decker, where they called deckers in Boston, deckers, house. And I had two sisters, one who was 11 years older than me and one that was one year older than me, but I didn't hear the N-word in my house.

But I didn't hear the words of Martin Luther King Jr. in my house either. It was in 1950, I guess '52 or '53 is the first time I really understood what was happening.

We'd taken a trip from Boston to Florida for a vacation, and all of a sudden...We were just talking about Delaware. We just have a lieutenant governor from Delaware here. When you get about New Jersey outside of Philadelphia, you're heading into Delaware, you would start seeing colored and white signs, and then you would see colored and white water fountains, and bathrooms, and restrooms.

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How many of you remember that in the audience, remember those signs? And I, of course, wanted to know why they were there. I didn't really get a decent explanation from my parents, although I tried to get an explanation from that just the way it was. And I knew it wasn't the way it was. So, we took a ferry across from Virginia, and I was in Virginia from Chesapeake to Norfolk, and it was totally segregated inside.

It was the first time I had experienced a segregated restaurant. I saw the signs. So, I decided that I was going to go in the black side where they called colored sign then, and my father really got angry with me. He said, "Don't do this.You know, it's going to cause problems."

And he said, "We're in a different situation now, and we'll be that way for the next two weeks," while we were on vacation in Florida. So, I immediately kind of began to, you know, say, "Hey, I'm with them, not with you." And I say them to you because I felt a compassion for people of color that were segregated, not only in schools but in restaurants, and hotels, and job opportunities, and education.

When I was in Boston and in Somerville, there was probably three black kids in our class, and when I left Somerville after my mother died and we went to Framingham, Mass, which is a suburb of Boston, and it was about the same. And then when my mother died when I was 12 years old, I really got involved in the civil rights movement, and I put myself on the lines at the picketing Woolworths in Central Square in Cambridge when I was 12 years old in support of those who were sitting in at the lunch counters in the South, in Greensboro, North Carolina actually.

And I wasn't arrested, it was just a support demonstration. But what happened was my father kind of lost it, and I wound up in which I could say one of the best things ever happened to me in my life was I wound up going to a boys' home in Massachusetts.

My father just pretty much had given up on us, but my aunt, who lived in Maryland, Cambridge, Maryland, not Cambridge, Mass, said that she would take me in. But at that boys' school in Boston, for which I was there for three months, I met the inner city kids, black and Puerto Rican kids from inner-city Boston. And at that point, I really understood what was happening in terms of this movement.

And at that very young age of 12 years old, I decided that this was going to be what I wanted to do if I would go down and die for the revolution to change this country. And, I mean, it was a kind of situation...Excuse me, I'm not going to get that. I'm gonna turn my phone off because it's very impolite to have it on while you're trying to speak. I will say this, at that point, at 12 years old, I made the decision, the firm decision that I was going to be in a movement.

And when I moved in with my aunt who lived in Cambridge, Maryland, there was a big demonstration going on in Cambridge, Maryland, and a guy named John Lewis who headed up the student non-violent coordinating committee, this is 1962, '63, was in Cambridge to help a woman named Gloria Richardson desegregate the restaurants.

Now, we're talking about Cambridge, Maryland, so we know how far that boundary, that black-white boundary came down, that Jim Crow boundary came down, that North-South boundary came down.

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Cambridge, Maryland, is on the Eastern shore of Maryland. So, I went to an all-white high school for the first time in my life, Cambridge High School in Cambridge, Maryland, then.

And my aunt was fairly progressive. In those days, if you got "The Washington Post" on Eastern Shore, you were considered liberal. And she did, and she was rather progressive. But I decided to sneak out one night to go to the mass meeting in a rally and take two other people with me. And this was the first time I was in an all-black church in Cambridge, Maryland.

And I was not 12 years old then, I was 14 years old. But at that point, I understood what that movement was about, and you would hear those songs coming out of people who've been working all day long coming out to try to get liberty, and justice, and freedom, and segregation. I'm going to have to destroy this phone.

But I will say that my passion was so real. My passion was so strong at that point that I knew that this was going to be something I wanted to do that I wanted to get freedom and justice for all. I wanted to see the voting rights and the civil rights bills passed that happened not too long after 1963 when I actually got involved in the movement.

I wanted to see, particularly after hearing Dr. King Mickey's remarkable speech in March in Washington in 1963, after he saw kids in Birmingham being murdered at a church, firebombed, having demonstrators of kids being water-hosed and fire-hosed down in Birmingham.

I knew that that was going to be my passion. I knew that's what I was going to do. I knew that that's what I wanted to do. And so, my aunt wound up moving to Jacksonville, Florida, to be closer to her daughter, whose husband had passed. He was a jet pilot and went down. And so, we lived in Jacksonville. So, we moved to Jacksonville, Florida.

And that's when I really started to getting involved in the movement, so to speak. My high school was named after the founder of the Ku Klux Klan, Nathan Bedford Forrest, Forrest High School. And that certainly gave me a...And the school was totally white. So, I became an organizer for an all-white high school in Jacksonville, Florida, and probably involved over 100 students in that high school to get involved in changing the name of that high school.

I also became the editor of my newspaper, "Forrest High" newspaper, and I tried to change the name of Forrest High for the newspaper. They kicked me out. And then what happened? Selma. And I knew that I had to be in Selma after what I saw on that bloody Sunday in March of 1965.

John Lewis and Jose Williams leading demonstrators across the Edmund Pettus Bridge over the Alabama River, where you saw 150 police sheriffs on horses with grenades. I said that moment at that moment when they marched across that bridge.

By the way, it's a funny little incident there, Jose Williams, who was with John Lewis on the top of that bridge in Selma, Jose Williams says to John Lewis, "Can you swim?" John Lewis says, "I can't either." He said, "I can't swim.And Jose, can you?" He said, "I can't either." And he said, "Well, we do that to march ahead." And they did.

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They marched ahead across that bridge, and it was broadcast on television. Television did so much for the civil rights movement, whether it was for young kids with the American bandstand, believe it or not, where they played the first real black music on TV, where you saw black and white kids dancing together in the late '50s and early '60s. Or being able to watch the evening news and see what was happening in Virginia, or Maryland, or South Carolina, or Louisiana, or Alabama, or Mississippi.

It came into your living room, and when it came into your living room, whether it was with the first 15-minute news or the half-hour news, it began changing people's thoughts. And what happened that night in Selma changed a lot of thoughts across this country. A man from Texas who was then president of the United States who had passed one of the greatest civil rights bills of all time, Lyndon Baines Johnson.

I know so much of you don't want us to look right at him and look at Vietnam. But Lyndon Johnson really was...If you wanted to look at a person who passed the civil rights bill in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, it was Lyndon Johnson. He may have had that South Texas accent, but he did it, and he probably didn't really mean to do it 10 years before then, but he was in that position of history.

So, I went to Selma and I was arrested a couple of times. The first two times in my life, I was actually arrested, and I decided that I was going to go back and finish high school and come back out and work that summer in the civil rights movement, Mississippi. And I went back to high school, and they said, "I'm sorry Tom Houck, you are expelled and you are not wanted here.We'll give you your diploma."

I refused the diploma. They wanted to give me my diploma, and I refused it. "We just simply do not want you to be here in this high school influencing these white students in this building," basically, is what they were saying. I'm paraphrasing, of course. So, I literally was, as you heard, a high school kick-out, which was fine with me because I wanted to go on and stay in the movement.

So, I left Jacksonville, Florida, and went to work in Mississippi in December of 1965. Now, Mississippi's Lothar law enforcement and their...which it was very closely together with the Klan...You know, it'd be like going to a place where the Taliban or ISIS was controlling.

I mean, literally, you'd be driving down the street, and police would stop you for driving in a car with a person of color, or they knew you were working in the civil rights movement, and they would stop you. They would arrest you for no reason whatsoever. Mississippi was like that. Mississippi was perhaps the most...The state was dripping with more racist hate than any other state in the country.

And that was very dangerous. Of course, the year before, three civil rights workers were killed in Mississippi in 1964. I knew that going in, but I was arrested several times in Mississippi. One place, basically, we were doing voter registration drives. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 had just passed and was signed into law, which would allow people to register to vote for the first time in 11 southern states of the old Confederacy.

So, our job was to go register people to vote. Well, those folks didn't want me registering people to vote. Those folks didn't want me in their town. I was a white N to them. So, a lot of white folks had worked in the movement. I was an almost Irish, but they thought I was Jewish, so they were using antisemitic terms to describe me. They would do anything that they could to force me out.

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I wasn't wanted there. My kind of viewpoints and my kind of politics weren't wanted there. So, I persisted and I was arrested about seven or eight times in 1965 mostly for disorderly conduct, refusing... Disorderly conduct is the thing they would use against you most of the time or being an annoyance to the public well-being, and annoyance to the public well-being and trying to get people to register to vote.

And I stayed in freedom schools in Mississippi, and I came back to Jacksonville for a while, and then I got invited to work with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. That was Dr. King's organization. He started SCLC. By the way, he was at something that Dr.

King was really the accidental leader. After he finished theology school in Boston, Daddy King, his father, wanted to come back to Atlanta to be the junior pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church. And he was ordained when he was 19 years old, Dr. King. But he met this beautiful woman while he was in Boston named Coretta Scott, and Coretta Scott lived in Marion, Alabama.

And she convinced Martin after they got married...They got married in her backyard, by the way, in Marion, Alabama. She had to have no big wedding that you had...you know, big church. They got buried in her backyard. Her father was a grocer in Marion, Alabama. But she convinced Martin to move to Montgomery and to preach in a small little church called Dexter Avenue Baptist Church.

He agreed, much to his father's chagrin. His father wanted him to be here in Atlanta. And Daddy King was very well known in Atlanta. He had been loved in politics. He had been, you know, the pastor of Avenue over 40 years and was involved in the local political struggles of Atlanta. So, Martin going to Montgomery was kind of an accident because he was supposed to be here.

And he went to pastor this little church, this little church in Montgomery called Dexter Avenue. But it was a little church that had a lot of postal workers. And if you were black in the South in those days, being a postal worker was a damn good job. And a lot of school teachers and a couple of nurses even were in his flock, and he had no intention of getting involved in the civil rights movement.

And then Rosa Parks decided that she was not going to leave her a seat on that bus, which was kind of an orchestrated thing, by the way, the NAACP in Montgomery and the Montgomery Improvement Association orchestrated that but did well. And they heard that there was this young preacher from Atlanta in town, and Montgomery Improvement Association, they were having a rally that night in Birmingham, in Montgomery rather, and Ralph Abernathy

[inaudible] became Dr. King's best friend, and asked if Martin would come in and say a few words. Well, he came and said a few words. And from that point on, he was a voice that came along once in a millennium. He became such a leader from just that one night in Montgomery, right after Rosa Parks was arrested. No one knew who Martin Luther King Jr. was, but he was known from that point on.

And he wasn't going to take a big part in the movement. He said he was going to stay home and raise his family and stay with his kids. He didn't. He became the leader that we knew him to become during the '60s, in the '50s. And in 1957, after the desegregation of the bussers in Montgomery, Dr. King and Ralph Abernathy, who became, as I said, best friend and Joe Lowry created the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and they moved the operation to Atlanta.

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And, of course, Daddy King then got his wish that Martin became his junior pastor, and he was very happy to hear that. But that's how Martin really got involved in the movement was by accident that he was asked to make a speech during the bus boycott. And once he made that speech, there was no turning back. So, I started to work for SCLC, and SCLC, even though it says Southern Christian Leadership Conference, it was, you know, mostly black pastors.

Somebody asked me the other day, "What's your religion?" I said, "I don't know, I'm a little bit black Baptist, maybe and a Hindu, and a Muslim, and a Jew.But a mixture of all." But, you know, having the opportunity to work for SCLC...And I was paid $15 a week subsistence wages to organize in Birmingham, and this is in January of 1966 was the first major test for Birmingham on the voting rights act because Voting Rights Act had passed in '65, and Birmingham, as many of you might've known through history, was a very recalcitrant kind of place to change things.

We used to have a guy named Bull Connor there. Anybody ever heard the name Bull Connor? And so, we went back to Birmingham, Birmingham 2, we called it. And during this time at Birmingham 2, students came out. We got arrested again. All we were trying to do is get registrars in Birmingham. Under the Voting Rights Act of 1965, if you came under that law in that section with Birmingham, Jefferson County did, you could have federal registrars coming in.

They were registering 10 people a week in Birmingham, 10 people a week. And they asked them questions like, how many jelly beans are in this jar? Or who was the first attorney general of the state of Alabama? I mean, you know, obscure, ridiculous kinds of questions. So, we went in, and we started, you know, going to the federal courthouse every day, doing demonstrations, sitting in the middle of intersections, doing all the kinds of things that the movement did back in the early '60s in that non-violent kind of way.

That non-violent way, by the way, was the way that got us noticed. Non-violence, which was Dr. King's crew strong weapon, was that the weapon that got us noticed, and yeah, a lot of blood splattered. A lot of guns were killed. A lot of guns killed people during that movement, but things changed. I mean, I would consider from 1963 to 1968 as being the greatest years of social revolution in this country.

I think they were absolutely incredible. So much was done in those three years. And it was a feeling every day that when you woke up, you were going to accomplish something. I wish we could say the same today. But we can't very softly. So, I went to Birmingham, got arrested in Birmingham.

Of course, they put me in the white side of the jail, and that was still segregated. And then in that Birmingham jail, I was kept for three days. I got my leg cut. Somebody took a razor and cut my leg, and I had 17 stitches in my knee. So, when I came out of that jail in Birmingham, I told Jose Williams, who was Dr.

King's field Marshall, that we need to desegregate this jail. I said, "We have to." So, Jose Williams and I filed suit against Birmingham, Jefferson County jail. In 1966 it became Hawkin Williams V Birmingham, Jefferson County, and went all the way to the Supreme court and won. So, we declared a victory. We had desegregated jails of America.

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Of course, today, they're resegregated, but we did desegregate the jails of America. Williams was very proud of that honor. So, Dr. King comes to Birmingham because we had won a victory. The federal marshals started coming in. Instead of 10 black folks a week getting registered to vote, 10,000 black folks were being registered a week, and white folks as well.

I mean, they would come because we had voter registrars there. And so, Dr. King and came to Birmingham to congratulate everybody for the victory. And I was going to come back to Atlanta anyway, but Bernard Lee, who was his assistant, asked if anybody could write in the room, and I raised my hand and Dr.

King, who had just didn't really know me very well, you know, he had knew of me, he said, "Tom, I hear you haven't even finished high school.How can you write?" And I said, "Well, I can.I was the editor of my high school newspaper." And he said, "Well." He needed some people to answer mail. So, they gave me a bus ticket to come to Atlanta. This is 1966, probably around February, March.

And I got the bus. Came to Atlanta. It was a Sunday afternoon. I arrived here, and Dr. King had just finished speaking down at Ebenezer. I came back too late to get down Ebenezer. So, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which had its headquarters...I wish you guys could have been in town to take my tour.

That's part of my tour. But the SCLC office is right down in the street from Ebenezer Baptist Church, which was Dr. King's church, and so Dr. King and Coretta Scott came down the street. I had called...How many people here remember payphones? I put a nickel in the payphone across the street from SCLC to call to get a ride. That was going to stay at the Freedom House.

And I was waiting across the street and Kings came down the street. Dr. King saw me, asked me if I wanted a ride to the Freedom House, and I said, "Absolutely yes, I decided to call somebody, but they're not here yet. So, I get in the car. Actually, one of the King kids, Bernice, who was the youngest, was sitting in the front with Coretta and Martin, and she got into the back seat and I sat in the front seat, and he asked me if I had lunch.

You know, I said, "No, I haven't eaten lunch yet." And he said, "Well, come with us over by our house for lunch." I mean, can you...? Hold on. I mean, here I am, an 18-year-old kid, be 19 in August, one of the King Jr. won a Nobel peace prize. Led the March on Washington.

"I Have a Dream" speech. I mean, the international leader inviting to his house for Sunday lunch. And, of course, I said yes, but I felt, you know...In those days, I was much thinner then, and I actually had an Afro. I guess you could put a wig around this stuff today.

But I actually had an Afro. A funny story, once I got to know Coretta, she permed me. She gave me a permanent one time. I'm serious. Well, you had to perm yourself, you know, white folk, try to get your hair in that kind of condition. But at any rate, so we went to the house, and I can remember we had chicken visits, chicken wings, everything chicken, and greens, and believe it or not, we had potato salad, and we had corn pudding.

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I mean, it was incredible. Big long tail...By the way, the Kings had a cook and a housekeeper. Her name was Mrs. Lockhart, and she sat at the table with us. So, she might have cooked the meal, and Coretta might have helped her cook the meal.

And she will try to get the kids to do some stuff in those days, but there was no first name stuff with Mrs. King and Dr. King's housekeeper. So, at any rate, we finished lunch. I'm still stunned by the fact that here I am sitting at the table of Martin Luther King Jr. in his house in Atlanta. And Martin said that he had some work to do back in the office, and Mrs.

King said that she had heard that I was from Boston originally and wanted to talk to me about Boston and the kids wanted me to play football with him. So, he said he'll come back to get me or somebody from the Freedom House to come pick me up. Well, about two hours later, after a conversation with Mrs. King, she asked me if I had my driver's license, and I couldn't figure out why she asked me if I have my driver's license.

I said, "Yeah, I have my driver's license." He said, "Well, I've had trouble with my driver.Do you think that you could take the kids to school tomorrow?" Of course, I don't know anything about Atlanta. I mean, I'm not really knowing Atlanta at all. This is in 1966. I was working in Alabama. I've been in Atlanta a couple of times, but I didn't know how to get around, and we didn't have GPSs in those days.

I mean, you know, you got to get a map out here like this and take a look and go through the map and go to different quadrants of where you want to go. There was no internet to try to find out where you were going. There was no smartphone that would let you get your directions right there, you know. It was all what you had to do in this map. All right.

So, I said I would knock on and say no to Mrs. King. And I said, "Yes, I'll take the kids to school." And then I went to find some maps because the kids went to two different schools. And she said, "Why don't you take one of our cars? You'll be staying at the SCLC Freedom House. And Dr.

King came back, and he said that Coretta tells me that you're going to be driving the kids to school. And I said, "Yes, I am." And he said, "Well, you going to answer mail too, right?" And I said, "Yeah, I'm going to answer mail.I'll do that." So, I took their car back, and everybody in our...All the staff at SCLC could not believe, could not believe that I had gone to Dr. King's house for lunch, number one.

And number two, I mean, they couldn't believe that I was going to drive the kids to school. I mean, it was just like mind-boggling. I was one of those, you know, accidental drivers if you will. So, I went and picked the kids up and then over the next two or three weeks, I really got into knowing everybody that the Kings were involved in in Atlanta, from their travel agent, to their doctor, to their dentist to, you know, a lot of their friends because I'd be picking things up and so forth.

Then Dr. King asked Bernard Lee, who was Dr. King's personal assistant then...Bernard Lee, by the way, was with Dr. King most of the time that he was in the movement from '63 to '68. Not many people don't know that name, but he was very, very important to Martin as his personal assistant.

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And so, Bernard Lee, one time couldn't go out of town with Dr. King. I went out of town with him. Dr. King had no security, by the way. No security. He didn't want to have, you know, all these folks that, you know, would be hanging around and being his security.

Of course, the police weren't going to be his security. The only security he had outside of his house here in Atlanta was the FBI across the street. You know, they'd be sitting out there. You would see this white guy with his hat, you know, officer in his black car. We knew that it was the FBI bugging his house, you know. But he didn't have security.

He didn't have security in Memphis that day that he was assassinated in 1968. But anyway, so I spent nine months, probably the most remarkable nine months of my life working with Dr. King, his wife, Coretta, who I loved very, very much. By the way, a strong, strong woman, and very much influential in terms of the civil rights movement and the women's movement.

Coretta was one of them. I would say one of the first in the country in the 1960s to lead demonstrations for women and women's rights. Jeannette Rankin Brigade. Jeannette Rankin was with first Congresswoman. Someone said they were from Montana here? Jeannette Rankin was from Montana, but Coretta was very much involved in that.

But those nine months were wonderful. People always ask me, "What was it like working for Martin Luther King Jr.?" Well, except for the jealousy from the rest of our staff, I was so much, like, working...What you saw with King in a public persona was like that in his private life.

Martin was a kind and decent human being. A very funny and witty man. He used to play on merciful jokes on Ralph Abernathy. He loved his kids and his family. He could shoot a few hoops in the back of his house. He would play horse with the kids, basketball.

He would always love coming back from the road. He traveled a lot. And, you know, I caught Dr. King and kind of, like, the years of his life that... And '66 and '67 and '68 that were not the best for Dr. King. The movement was changing.

So, I mean, I saw a lot of that, but he didn't bring that into the family. And actually, he would show the kids...He loved to play pool, and he would show the kids how to shoot pool. He actually ventured...He saw himself as being a hustler all day at the pool table. And he had so much fun doing that.

And he loved, you know, to listen to R&B and gospel music in the car. When I would pick him up at the airport, he would like to drive, but he had a heavy foot. And you know, he'd gotten several tickets, speeding tickets. But one of the funniest things that happened was when Coretta asked me to go over to Daddy King's office to pick up something.

Daddy King had white boys working for my son, and that's me. And he said, "You know, it's dangerous out here.This is 1966 old man, and he only passed these voting civil rights bills a few years ago." He said, "Are you okay doing that?" I mean, this is really...I mean, just talk in 1966 and...you know, just wasn't a couple of years and I said yes.

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I did get a couple of tickets, and he fixed them. Daddy King did. But we got along after that but daddy King was very, very suspicious, but he also paid or signed for my first car. Daddy King was a very generous man to me, and so was the King family. But I wanted to go back to organize. It was great working with the King family.

I got to know everybody in Atlanta, but I only wanted to go back to organize, and we were doing open housing demonstrations in the summer of '66, and I wanted to be in Chicago. I wanted to do some of the anti-war stuff that Dr. King was getting very much involved in 1967. And I really, really didn't want to just drive, I wanted to go out there in the field and organize demonstrations, organize rallies, organize masses.

I can see this room is full of organizers. But, you know, it was one of those things that I really want it to do. So, after about nine months, I went back out to the staff at SCLC, and I went to Chicago.

And in Chicago, we did open housing demonstrations. And I want to tell you something, some of the most vicious attacks on us, those of us who were trying to get open housing in Chicago by the white people that were throwing rocks and bricks and firebombs and so were almost as bad, if not worse than Mississippi.

And many of those neighborhoods today in Chicago, which were Irish, Italian, and Polish are now almost all black and in Southside of Chicago and the West side of Chicago. So, things really changed. I mean, we got some integration in there, but now it's all black. And also become very violent neighborhoods.

That gun violence is very, very heavy in that part of Chicago. So, I went to Chicago, and I spent six months there then, and then we came back to Atlanta and inside of SCLC, we organized what we called the peace department, P-E-A-C-E, and that was around Dr. King's coming out against the war in Vietnam in 1967.

And that's also when hell hath no fury of Lyndon Johnson coming down on King around the war because really Martin Luther King was one of the key figures in ending that war in Vietnam. God, that's a long time ago, you know, when you think about it.

And we organized a mobilization on Washington, and I helped him with his first major address at Riverside Church in New York in 1967. King was committed to ending the war because he had spoken out before that how could you be a pastor of non-violence and leading a mass movement in this country and around the world and not be opposed to the violence of Vietnam?"And, of course, he couldn't segregate his moral authority.And he didn't.So, we worked on that.And then, you know, as I said, these were times when a lot of leadership in 1967 and even NAACP and Urban League and some of the more mainstream black organizations came down on King for his position on the war in Vietnam.And, you know, the organization wasn't raising the kind of money.The movement that occurred during the early 1960s and from the days of Rosa Parks in the late 1960s had begun to change considerably.It had gotten voting rights passed, it had gotten public accommodations and civil rights bill passed, but you'd never did get economic justice.You never got, you know, economic justice and freedom.Poor people were out there in masses, and nothing, even with some of the great society programs that were going on, still left a lot of people impoverished.So, the last campaign that Dr. King did was the Poor People's

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Campaign.And by the way, there was...Probably there was a nurse nursing staff in Washington at Resurrection City.And they were wonderful, if I might say so myself. And Dr.King actually had several unions, hospital workers unions, 1199 in New York, for example, was a big backer of the civil rights movement.But so many nurses became volunteers in the civil rights movement.The civil rights...and I know that you had another speaker here the other day, but there was a nurses committee and a doctors committee for civil and human rights.And there were so many things that, you know, people ask what can be done now as we move ahead, as we look beyond Dr. King's dream.And after the '60s...I mean, what has happened from 1968 to 2019?We have Donald Trump president.I mean, we can say we've really not come that far.When you have somebody that echoes of the words of George Wallace sitting in the White House, you know, you've not come that far from 1965, 1966.And when you take a look at each one and the departments that government,from the justice department to health and

[inaudible 00:38:39.003] to any of the organizations that many of the cabinet positions, he's totally destroyed them.I mean, he puts a person in there as the head of education that is against public schools.You know, I went to private colleges and private schools.So, we've come a long way in terms of a degrading society, and we've come a long way, and I'm not going to in any way discredit what happened during this period in terms of...But we still got probably a third to 40% of the population in this country black, white, and Hispanic still left out and left behind, still in poverty.And that's still not been changed.That hasn't been cured.And that is a battle that must continue.The question of finding affordable housing for people now is a question, people that had a nice little house in the cities across this country and found that their taxes went up because folks moved in down the block and developers saw a way of making more money and then they couldn't live there because the taxes were too high.So, gentrification has become a problem for poor people in this country, particularly poor people that had their own houses.Here in Atlanta, the neighborhood that Dr.King grew up in, which was the poor to middle-income neighborhood is today...and it was all black then, middle income to low-income black.Today is probably 80% white.I mean, that's how it's changed over the years.It has just become incredible in terms of that change.So, there's so much to do.Where do we begin?We don't have a movement in the country.When we do have a movement in this country, many of those boomlets that we've seen in this country from the LBG, the gay civil rights movement to the Me Too movement, you know, women's movements, women's liberation movement back in my days in Mississippi, those was offshoots of SCLC and SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.Those were the organizations that gave route to the other organizations out there.So, so much of what we do today in the movements that you see came from them.I just love the other day.I don't know whether anybody saw this young 16-year-old girl at the United Nations.When she got up...They were talking about the environment and talking about global warming.What a voice she had.And when she came, How dare you?"

She said. Talked about money when we'd be talking about lives. And I think that that's important for most of the people in this room as well, that when we talk about saving lives is talking about our climate. And I know that in so many of the battles that we're going to be seeing in the next few years, which you'll be at the center of them because we would be having a discussion about whether it should be Medicare for all.

I love my Medicare, but I don't know whether I want to do it for everybody. I mean, we going to get rid of private insurance. How much say does nurses boards have and say of public policy along the lines of Medicare?

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How much? How much? Say. None? None at all. But these issues are going to be at the forefront of the next decade. And millennials, you know, are not going to be sitting around saying, "Well, I'm not going to wait until I'm 65 for my Medicare."

But then we have to take a look, what do we do with private insurance? Do we get rid of private insurance? I mean, that's a question, do we get rid of private insurance? Now, one of those folks that was the advocate to getting rid private insurance, Bernie Sanders, I understand, and had to have a stent put in his heart, and he's out of business for a few days, but he has Medicare.

That's why he says going to be doing so well. But, I mean, that's where the future is in terms of talking about what happened in the '60s or what we're going to go as we move into 2020. How are we going to change the system and society we live in? Are we going to be able to do it?

Are we going to able to, you know, lower drugs per scummy? Everybody in this room knows what the costs of drugs are. I mean, really, I have a blood pressure medicine that costs me 90 bucks, and I've got one of those gap policies, you know, and I have, you know, a gap policy beyond Medicare. So, these are going to be challenges for your profession.

And so many of you out there are going to have to be the first folks out there to begin to challenge the rest of society to understand what the issues are. And I know you will. But anyway, I'm honored to be here. I'll take any question you want. And I'll continue talking for another hour if you'd like, but thank you very much.

Questions? Thoughts? Let's hear it. - [Phyllis] Phyllis Mitchell from Bernie's state, Vermont.

- Vermont.

- Yes. So, what have you done since? What have you done since?

- Oh, a lot. For 20 years, I was a talk show host. I was a lot of lefty talk show host, which you don't have anymore. We got run over by the Rush Limbaugh, you know, vast right-wing conspiracy. So, from 1980, here in Atlanta, actually a separate organization called the National Association of Talk Show Host, which Limbaugh took a part in and Hannity as well.

But we got rolled to the side. The talk radio in this country became the voice of the right-wing. And now it's really dominated by right-wingers. I like to think that liberals like to read more than listening to BS on the radio. But for 20 years I was a talk show host.

I was political editor for "Atlanta" magazine here. I also wrote a column for a weekly newspaper here and did a TV show for 20 years called "The Georgia Gang." And I took whether progressive position on that. And then I went into the consultancy business, political consultancy business for four or five years, and three years ago, I decided to do what I do so well is give people tours around Atlanta and create a company called Civil Rights Tour Atlanta.

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And if you're ever here, I'd love for you to come take the tour. It's Civil Rights Tour Atlanta. We do private tours, and we do a public tour every Saturday. And I've been doing that for almost five years now. Next question. - [Female]

Hi.

- Hi - What do you think it was...? What qualities about Dr. King do you think it was that made him so inspirational? You had mentioned that in Birmingham, he kind of accidentally fell into this because after he said those words, you know, people wanted to follow him. What do you think it was about him?

- You know, I think that...By the way, he wasn't born Martin Luther King.

- I know.

- His name was Michael at birth and was until his father had gone to...and this was just prior to Hitler taking over Germany in 1938. It was during that time, King Sr. had gone to a big Lutheran conference in Berlin. And he was a lover of Martin Luther, a very controversial theologian as most people know.

Until today, Martin Luther, Michael King was Daddy King's father's name, so he became Martin Luther King Jr. Otherwise, we were celebrating a Michael King birthday. Now, that doesn't sound right, but, well, Martin Luther King. So, what was it about him? You know, I mean, what was it about and that made him Martin Luther King Jr.? And I would say a voice like his comes along once in a millennium, if that. You know, that kind of leadership...It was just inside him.

People had said that he was like that when he was in high school. You know, he finished high school when he was 14, went to Morehouse college here in Atlanta, finished Morehouse where he was 17. I mean, he had that ability. He was kind of a person that understood that he was a voracious reader and writer. I mean, he would write and read and study, and he would, you know, know theologians and, you know, his dissertation on leadership.

Even though he was in Montgomery in 1965 and 1955 when the Montgomery bus boycott and became the leader of that boycott and the local voice around the country. I think it was kind of meant to be.

I think that that was something that was ingrained in him, and it came from his father, who was a preacher. His granddaddy was a preacher. 100 they were at Ebenezer Baptist Church, and he just took that preaching skill and ability from here in Atlanta. He made it international and lead...He was so smart to think about where the movements were and to pick up the Gandhi and philosophy of non-violence.

- Yeah. And was Coretta supportive of... I'm always struck by leaders who are...I don't want to say everyday people. He wasn't just an everyday person. He was an exceptional person, but, you know, you said he fell into the movement he didn't want to. He wanted to raise his children.

He wanted to have, you know, probably a much simpler life, and we can see why now he was assassinated. I just wonder what was Coretta's role in that? Did she push him to be that leader?

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- Not much he'd only pushed him to be that leader, but she was really a coequal in so many ways in the family. She went out and raised money for his organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. She was a trained opera singer, actually a concert singer. She went to New England School of Conservatory in Boston. That's where Martin and her met in Boston.

And so, she would do freedom concerts for SCLC and go out and raise money for SCLC. By the way, Dr. King could also sing. He was in the Glee club and the boys' choir here, and he also played the violin and the piano, and they had a music room in their house. Next question.

- [Kathy] Hi, I'm Kathy Borrisey from Washington DC. This is more of a...This is a comment, and it's to say thank you. I feel that Martin Luther King was an idol. So, I did grow up in a family that saw this stuff on TV, and we talked about it, so to hear you speak is overwhelming. So, I want to say thank you.

But being here at this leadership and public policy, what I'm struck with is courage. And it takes courage to be a leader. And thank you for walking over to the black side.

- Dare to struggle, dare to win.

- And it took courage. And, you know, sometimes we try to be so neutral so we don't offend people. And we talked about negotiating - It took courage and love, by the way.

- It did. It took courage and love.

- And love.

- And love. And it takes to...You have to love people that are different from you, and you have to have the courage to share that, to listen. I know I started getting uneasy when you started going left-wing that, "Oh, God, he's going off-script," and that people don't hear, and once you do that, then people shutting down and they don't hear you.

But we can't be afraid of that. Sometimes people do get in that moment, but if you give them a minute, we can move back out of it. We don't always have to agree, but we do have to be aware. We have to feel, and I think sometimes we get so scared of offending that we lose our ability to be human.

And so, I felt something that just started moving through me. I'm about this close from crying but thank you. Thank you.

- Thank you. Thank you very much. You know, I'm 72 years old. I was like one of the youngest people around during the movement today. You know, most of my friends that are surviving from those days are in their '80s. Andrew Young, 86, for example. Andrew Young was Dr.

King's assistant. He was the UN ambassador. He was the mayor here at Atlanta, and probably more responsible for getting the Olympics here in 1996. John Lewis is almost 80, 79, one of my closest and dearest friends, as a matter of fact. My friend Julian Bond, who headed up the then NAACP, just passed a couple of years ago.

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So, many of the voices, Joe Lowry, he's in his 90s. CT Vivian, who stood up in Selma, Alabama, to Jim Clark, is in his 90s. So, so many people. That's why we need these young voices out there to get out there and help some of these old folks.

I don't think I saw my last day carrying a picket sign. I'll put it here that way. And certainly, I mean, I think we need a massive voter registration. Something you can do, by the way, as nurses in these boards, I mean, you can even find ways to get involved to register people to vote, which is kind of a non-partisan thing. Not really, but it is.

You can say it's non-partisan. You know what I mean, but I can see myself really seriously. I can see myself getting arrested again, particularly with this not in the White House. And yeah, I mean, it's dangerous. Our country has gone [noise], and so yeah, I mean, I don't think that you've heard the last of my voice.

Let's hear other questions. I know we've got some. Or you all just realizing it's almost 5:00, and you're headed to the bar. - [Crystal] Hi, I'm crystal Tillman from the North Carolina board. So, it sounds like you and your father split ways.

Did you ever reconnect? Did he ever say, "I'm so proud of you, son, for what you've done?"

- I didn't get the last part of that.

- Did your father realized and said, "I'm so proud of you, son?"

- Oh, my God. Well, there's been some sadness and some tragedy in my family, unfortunately, but I think that through that, you know...When he left me when I was 12 years old, essentially, I became a ward of the great Commonwealth of Massachusetts. I think that one was rewarding to me because I met so many kids from the inner city of Boston, Roxbury, and Dorchester.

Dorchester, as they said, Dorchester, you know, then. I kind of, like, it brought me into a kind of a different sphere of my life. You know, I didn't realize that there was so much of a challenge for people of color in this country and realized that I didn't know what to call it back then, but I knew I saw it, and it came to me, and it came to my feelings.

So, my father, did we ever make up? That's a hard one. In 1976, he passed, 1976. He passed at age 76. No. We never really formally made up. He did come to my auntie's sister's house a couple of times, but by and large, we did not ever see eye to eye again.

And, you know, I'm thinking about writing a little bit about that experience because it's a very difficult one for me. - [Female] Thank you so much for sharing your stories. I think this will be a good transition into the center for civil rights tomorrow.

- Let me just tell you about that.

- Oh, sure.

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- Yeah. I mean, do not leave town early. I mean, it is an exceptional place. And it's a good way to end other than taking my tour. It's a good way to end the conference because you'll get the feel and experience, not just civil rights in the South, but human rights around the world, and the movements that have changed history in this country and in other nations around the world.

And it was a beautiful idea. It was by a former mayor, Shirley Franklin, and by Evelyn Lowry, Joseph Lowry's wife. And they raised about, I think probably half of the money they wanted to raise. They wanted to double the size of the center. But by all means, take a look at the King papers they have. They wrote taped Martin's thinking papers in there and look at his writings.

Go in there, and they have this counter in there where you'll feel what it was like to sit at a lunch counter, you know, in the days of the citizens in early 1960s. So, I should be paid to be a sponsor of the center for civil and human rights. But it's a wonderful place, and it's a place that I think that for those who will be here tomorrow, that you need to spend a couple of hours.

- Well, thank you. Thank you again for everything you've done, and thank you for speaking to us today.

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