



50
years

“A LONG, LONG WAY TO GO”

Fifty years ago this month, Martin Luther King Jr. told a Monmouth audience that while race relations in the U.S. were improving, there was still much work to be done. His message is every bit as relevant today.

by Dustin Racioppi

Tensions were running high when Martin Luther King Jr. landed on the half-mile strip of asphalt at Red Bank Airport on October 6, 1966. The Vietnam War was tearing the nation apart. Civil rights activists were being intimidated, beaten, and sometimes killed in their pursuit of justice. Even King, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, had come to be viewed by some Americans as a divisive figure, having been jailed, put under government surveillance, and denounced by the director of the FBI as “the most notorious liar in the country.”

Now the lightning-rod Baptist preacher from Georgia would be addressing the students, faculty, and staff of what was then called Monmouth College in a new phase of his civil rights campaign.

The college was predominantly white at the time, set in a conservative county and dealing with its own issues of race and discrimination, though nothing on the level of what was happening in the South. People who attended King’s speech that morning say students were generally accepting of minorities and looked forward to King’s visit.

“There was a big buzz on campus, like, ‘Oh, my God, Dr. Martin Luther King is going to talk.’ He was the inspirational leader of the civil rights movement at the time,” says Clancy Boynton ’68. He called his fiancée, Diane (née Sherry) ’66, who would later become his wife, and invited her to the speech. “We’ve got to go.”

Yet there was also a level of unease hovering over the visit. Webster Trammell ’70, ’73M recalls watching some college leaders seated in the front row “bracing themselves for shock” because, he suspects, many saw King “more as an instigator than as a healer.” Indeed, individuals at the highest levels of the federal government thought King had communist sympathies and were monitoring his activities and listening to his phone calls, according to The Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University.

The Boyntons remember hearing jeers when King took the stage. *The New York Times* reported—and people who were there remember—a Republican Monmouth County Freeholder and Monmouth College trustee, Marcus Daly, “booing and hissing” at King as he spoke.

“Dr. King just kind of shut him down [by being] very polite; [he] didn’t yell or scream, just answered and went on with his speech,” says Joseph Rall ’69. “You just had the impression that Dr. King was way up there in the sky. It couldn’t bother him.”

The substance of King’s address didn’t reach the notoriety of his iconic “I Have a Dream” speech given three years earlier. But many who were in Boylan that morning in 1966 remember King’s thundering delivery and the urgency and ambition of his message, and they left the gymnasium brimming with optimism, renewed with hope, and ready to answer King’s challenge “to unite to make justice a reality.”

Fifty years later, as the country continues to reckon with racial divisions factoring into an already roiling presidential race, King’s message still resonates. “We have made some significant strides in race relations,” he told the audience of roughly 2,600 people, but “we still have much to do and... there are many problems that are unsolved.”



Left to right: William G. Van Note, president of Monmouth College from 1962–1971; Martin Luther King Jr.; Michael Dadd ’68, president of Monmouth’s student union council in 1966.

In a way, King’s visit to Monmouth was a return to his ministerial roots. From 1948 to 1951 he attended Crozer Theological Seminary in Upland, Pennsylvania, and, according to the *Courier-Post*, routinely crossed the Delaware River to visit a row-house in Camden.

“He had first started on this path as a minister in Southern New Jersey, and dealing with segregation in New Jersey had kind of set the model for him to say, ‘Well I’m going to go home and combat this in Atlanta and, ultimately, in Alabama,’” says Walter Greason, a lecturer in Monmouth’s Department of History and Anthropology. “He always remembered that this was a place in the North where he had to come back and not lose sight of the national scope and depth of the problem of racial injustice.”

Memories of King

In the intervening years, King rose to prominence through his advocacy: meeting with presidents; publishing books, letters and sermons; elevating the national consciousness; participating in the Bloody Sunday march in Selma, Alabama. With King at the vanguard, the civil rights movement had secured major victories with the march on Washington in 1963, the Civil Rights Act in 1964, and the Voting Rights Act in 1965.

When King visited Monmouth, says Greason, he was “at the peak of his power.” He had started to make the connection between race and poverty and, more broadly, militarism and war. Beginning in 1966, King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference embarked on an expansion of their push for civil rights from the South to the North.

The central focus of the expansion was to end racial discrimination in housing, something Monmouth was dealing with as King visited. Just a day before his speech, students had occupied the president’s office to protest that two of the houses on the college’s list of approved off-campus dwellings were owned by landlords who would not rent to African Americans.

Martin Luther King’s Oct. 6, 1966, address at then Monmouth College didn’t have the wide-scale societal impact that his more famous speeches did, but it still left an indelible impression on many of those who were in attendance that day.



“His face was simply wonderful in its intensity and calmness... like he was well adjusted to being always in danger.... If you think about all the threats against his life, I think everything he did was gutsy.... I admired him for that. He had a Christian penchant for sacrifice.”

—Prescott Evarts, professor of English

“The way he spoke was so erudite, so clear, so comprehensive, and he had the crowd pretty much—I wouldn’t say eating out of his hand—but people were almost mesmerized with what he had to say because of the way he spoke.... Everybody was in rapt attention.”

—Webster Trammell ’70, ’73M



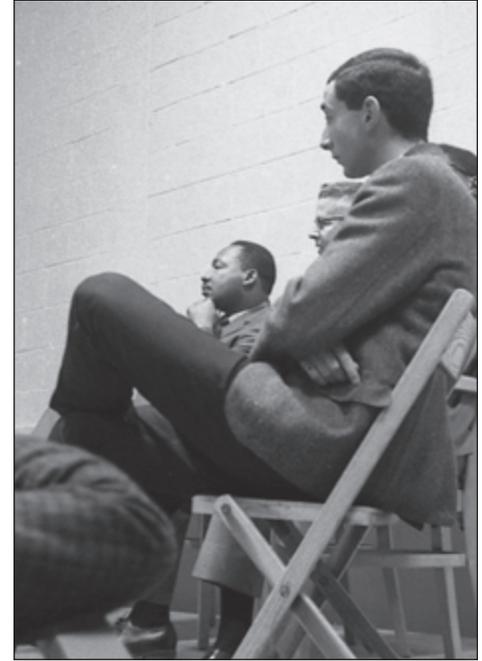
“To this day it was one of the most inspiring talks that I’ve heard. I felt very privileged to hear from him, in person, what that dream was about.”

—Diane Sherry Boynton ’66

“I’ve never heard—and I don’t think I ever will hear—anybody who’s delivered a more inspirational and passionate vision of what we need to do.... It was a very special moment.... Eighteen months later we were in Asbury Park in our little apartment watching TV when he got assassinated, and it was like, ‘Oh, my God, somebody took something away from me that was a gift.’”



—Clancy Boynton ’68



Dadd (seated in the foreground in the photo above) died in May 2015, but he told the *Asbury Park Press* in 1992 that he had received hate mail for his involvement with inviting King to speak on campus. His obituary noted that he was “honored to have served as the student host” for the civil rights leader.

King, dressed in a dark suit and standing at a simple wooden podium, began by saying the country had come “a long, long way since 1896,” when the U.S. Supreme Court upheld, in the landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* case, the “separate but equal” doctrine that allowed racial segregation in public facilities. More than half a century later, in 1954, the court reversed course and “said in substance” that the doctrine “must go,” said King. And after the major victories of the last three years, he said, “Now we stand on the border of the promised land of integration.”

Blocking the way was the issue of housing, one of the main planks of King’s speech at Monmouth, as well as the disadvantages in the workforce and “de facto” segregation in public schools that African Americans faced. King had already voiced his objection to the Vietnam War, and now was calling for the country to spend \$10 billion a year over the next decade on improving housing and helping lift minorities out of poverty—a small sum, in his view, compared to the \$24 billion being spent annually on the war at the time.

“By the thousands and the millions, Negroes all over the United States are still being lynched psychologically and

spiritually. Currently, in the inner city, we find the Negroes still living in dilapidated, deteriorated housing conditions,” King said. “It ends up that they live with wall-to-wall rats and ruins in so many instances. This is a day-to-day fact of life in so many areas and in all of our major cities.”

Yet King’s speech was suffused with optimism and a faith that “we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.” And though he drew initial disapproval from some in the crowd, by the end he had seized his audience and, for many students, emboldened them to take up his cause.

“The way he talked and what he said, and the verve and the passion, he got you to buy into it right there and then,” says Clancy Boynton. “You were part of it, and it never left me.”

Diane Boynton was a social worker in Red Bank at the time, and many of her clients were African American.

“I was seeing the discrepancies every day and the way people lived and how people were treated,” she says. “[King’s speech] inspired me more to do the work that I was doing. I felt so glad that I decided to be a social worker and be a part of the change in the times we were living in.”

Bill Frantz '64, then Monmouth's assistant director of student affairs, helped coordinate King's visit and was part of the group that escorted King from the airport to campus.

"It was important for the student body to see this man personally, firsthand, and listen to one of his speeches...so they [saw] all sides of what [was] going on in the world," says Frantz. "That's the whole point of college. You've got to see things and you've got to experience things."

Trammell, who worked on campus for several years after he graduated, and is now a university trustee, says King's speech and presence had an everlasting impact on him as well as the school. "You walk around this campus and you look at lunchtime here or dinnertime here, they accept you for who you are, not what you are," says Trammell. "King opened the door for that kind of dialogue and made it possible to sit at the same table and really engage in differences and not repel differences."

For Rall, the opening minutes of King's speech stuck with him throughout his career as an executive in accounting and finance. King had told the crowd that "the basic thing about a man is not his specificity but his fundamentum," or foundation—"not the texture of his hair, or the color of skin, but his eternal dignity and worth."

"I'd like to think that, as I got into business and work, I treated people the same and I promoted people who were the best person, the best worker, not because they were in the good-old-boy network or because they were white or they were a man," says Rall. "I've thought about that speech often, especially the line about the content of your character, and I've tried to do that. I hope I have, anyway."

Greason says King left more of an impression through his mere presence in the context of his pursuit of justice than for the words he spoke on campus.

"His commitment to the principle of love not being an idea, but being a practice—that if we really commit to how we connect with one another, how we listen to each other, how we improve each other's lives in measurable ways, that to me is what King is about," says Greason.

Yet that message has recently seemed all but lost. In the span of just a few weeks this past summer, the country became a "tinderbox," as Frantz put it, with a series of deadly shootings of black men by police. In the fallout of the violence, officers in Dallas, Texas, and Baton Rouge, Louisiana, were targeted and killed by black men, not only putting the nation on edge but also driving a wedge into the presidential race.

"Today I think not only are we back where we were, on a much grander scale, but there's a feeling like there's nothing we can do about it," says Franca Mancini '69, who retired as a psychological counselor from Monmouth last year and attended King's speech as an undergrad. "It just looks impossible right now. How do we stop this?"

But Mancini adds that now, just as much as 50 years ago, King's words ring true.

"It's overwhelming, but I hope that each of us, in our own small way, can get back to the power of one," says Mancini. "It's enormous, and we feel so overwhelmed that we feel paralyzed, but what we can do is what we do. If you're a teacher, teach and teach about this moment. If you're working in a convenience store, continue to do your job and do it well. Thinking you can make a difference on a world level is going to paralyze you. Knowing you can make a difference on an individual level is going to empower you...I feel like that was a big part of what Dr. King was saying: You can make a difference."

Editor's note: Special thanks to Chris Ellwood, archives collection manager, for his assistance with this article.

King's speech opened dialogue and made it possible to engage in, rather than repel differences, says Webster Trammell '70, '73M.