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ECHOES OF THE MARCH



Yonkers resident Corinne Thomas, 100, took the day off of work at Gimbels department store in Manhattan to see Martin Luther King Jr. speak during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Aug. 28, 1963. COLIN GUSTAFSON/THE JOURNAL NEWS

Retracing the steps in Washington 50 years later

By Colin Gustafson
and Peter D. Kramer

They came, young and old, on school buses from the South and charters from Chicago. Celebrities came, too, but the vast majority of the 250,000 people who took part in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom 50 years ago were not boldface names.

The footfalls of the March on Washington fell silent 50 years ago, not long after King's words "I have a dream" ceased to echo from the Lincoln Memorial. But the recollections are strong for those who were there. Here are some of their memories.

Stuart Marwell was 15 when he boarded a bus with 50 friends from the Mount Kisco chapter of the NAACP and took an overnight ride to history.

"My parents were both actively involved with the NAACP," Marwell said. "I was brought up in the movement for recognition of human rights and equality and racial justice. It was a natural thing for us to do."

Asked what he remembers about that bus ride —

"Young people have no idea the things we went through."

CORINNE THOMAS



IF YOU GO

What: An exhibit of lithograph collages from the 1963 March on Washington for Freedom and Jobs.

Where: Greenburgh Town Hall's Madeleine Gutman Gallery, 177 Hillside Avenue, Greenburgh.

When: Through Sept. 4. 9 a.m. - 5 p.m., weekdays.

Admission: Free. Call: 914-682-1574.

which he took with his mother's best friend and her daughter — Marwell sighed and said with a laugh: "I was probably sleeping. It was an overnight bus trip. And I think I was sleeping going back as well."

Marwell was wide awake when his bus arrived in D.C. the next morning; he and his friends found the National Mall so jammed they couldn't get close to the Lincoln Memorial.

"We were way across the Reflecting Pool, on the Washington Memorial side, but there was a pretty good sound system so we could hear all the speeches," he said.

In April of this year, Marwell was renovating his home when he found a keepsake his mother had put away in 1963. Inside the portfolio were five lithograph collages by artist Louis LoMonaco, each depicting an aspect of the struggle for civil rights.

"I hadn't seen it in 50 years," he said. "It was sold for a dollar at the march."

Marwell, now president and CEO of Curtis Instru-

ments in Mount Kisco, framed the prints — along with the button he wore that day — and displayed them in Curtis' corporate offices. But he wanted more people to see them, so a friend of his contacted Sarah Bracey White, who coordinates art and cultural activities for the town of Greenburgh. White oversees the town hall's art gallery, which had a rare open slot in its calendar coinciding with the anniversary. The lithographs will be on display weekdays through Sept. 4 at Greenburgh Town Hall's Madeleine Gutman Gallery.

"People don't realize what was going on in this country," Marwell said. "And the fact that some of that is beginning to creep back around with these state voter laws. One of the main focuses of this march was the right to vote and it was because of this march and other efforts that there was the Voting Rights Act. And 50 years later, these issues are surfacing again" in the wake of the Supreme Court's ruling loosening the restriction of the Voting Rights Act. "I see it eroding a bit and it's kind of frightening."

Sarah Bracey White was 17 and was also in Washington on the day of the march, but she was far from the National Mall, on purpose. Her schoolteacher sister, Constance, then 27, wanted to attend the march but needed someone to babysit her 2-year-old daughter, Lisa.

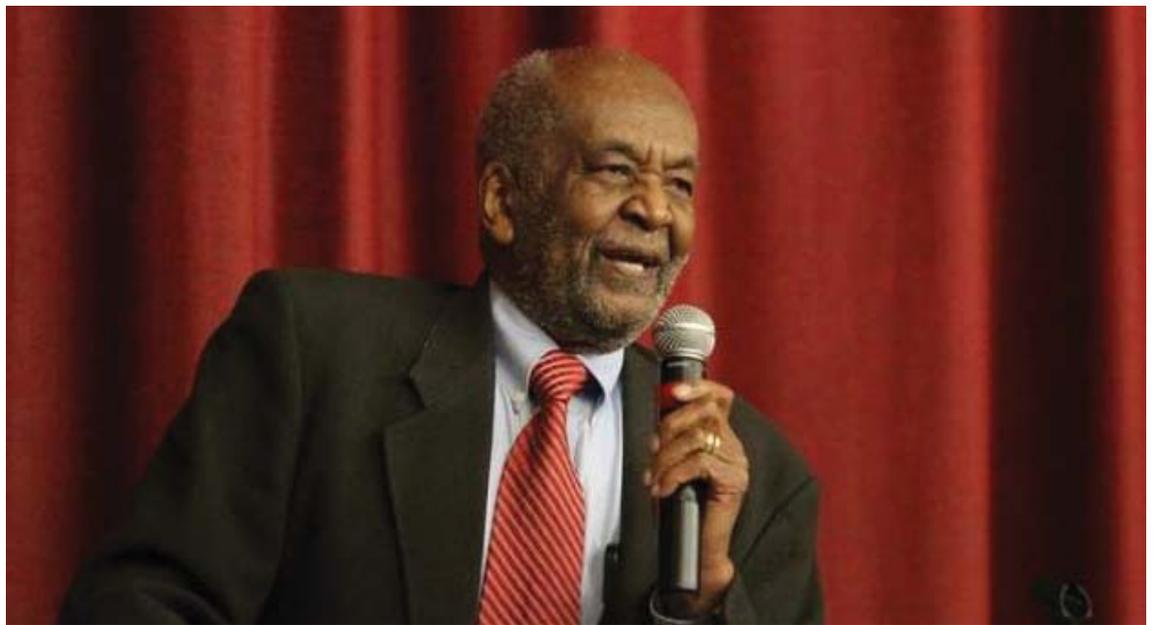
"We, as a family, expected there to be violence," said White, a native of Sumter, S.C., who now lives in Ossining. "So I stayed home with the baby and watched the march on television. I heard the same speech, but I heard it on television."

The violence White and her family feared didn't materialize.

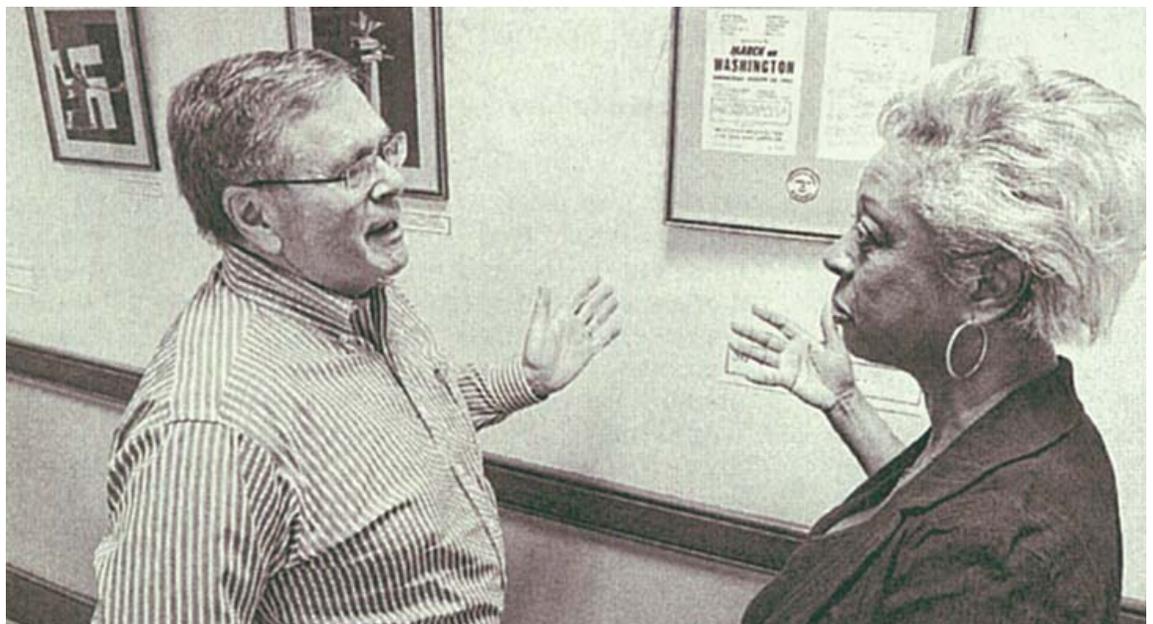
"My sister came home and said she wished we had all gone," said White. "She said it was the first time she felt the sense of equality in the world."

White's family was shattered by involvement in the civil rights cause. Her father, a schoolteacher and principal, was fired in the 1950s for refusing to name colleagues who attended NAACP meetings to press for equal pay.

"We were the example of the struggle within the black community, over the civil rights movement," White said. "My father felt you had to stick together as a group to make change; my mother felt that you had



Dr. Edmund Gordon addresses the audience during the Unity Celebration of the Life and Legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at Ramapo High School in Spring Valley in 2012. MATTHEW BROWN/THE JOURNAL NEWS



Stuart Marwell, CEO and President of Curtis Instruments in Mt. Kisco, with Sarah Bracey White at an exhibit featuring Marwell's memorabilia. MATTHEW BROWN/THE JOURNAL NEWS

to protect your own."

It's a struggle White chronicles in her memoir, "Primary Lessons," out next month from CavanKerry Press.

White missed the 1963 march, but she won't miss this one.

On Saturday, she'll be on the mall. In person.

Corinne Thomas, who turned 50 just before the 1963 march, took the day off from work as a saleswoman at Gimbels department store in Manhattan to see King speak.

As she rode to Washington in the wee hours of Aug. 28, 1963, memories of "whites only" lunch counters and buses with a "colored

section" were still fresh in her mind.

"The segregation was so bad in many places, you just wanted to do whatever you could to alleviate it — to let the world know you weren't satisfied with being second-class citizens," she recalled.

At the march, Thomas was too far back in the crowd to see King on the platform. But she heard him loud and clear. After humming with anticipation for much of the day, the enormous crowd on the National Mall suddenly fell quiet as King began speaking.

"We were listening to every word," Thomas said. "We were just pleased to be in his presence."

Now 100 years old, Thomas



Mount Kisco's Stuart Marwell wore this button at the 1963 march. MATTHEW BROWN / THE JOURNAL NEWS

says she's too old to travel back to Washington for the anniversary. But she does hope younger people will attend.

"Young people have no idea the

things we went through,” she said. “These are the kinds of things we need to keep our children aware of. That it could come back if we don’t keep our wits about us.”

Edmund Gordon of Pomona wasn’t content to attend the march himself. He wanted friends and neighbors to join him. The former president of the NAACP’s Spring Valley chapter led an effort to send some 200 people from Rockland County to Washington on at least a dozen buses.

Gordon, a psychologist, minister and professor emeritus at Yale and Columbia, recalled sharing many people’s concerns that violence could erupt at the march. He’d seen it happen a decade earlier when police attacked demonstrators at a rally in Peekskill led by singer and civil rights activist Paul Robeson.

The fact that no such disturbances broke out during the 1963 march was thanks in large part to a heavy police presence. “This time, the police were there to protect us,” Gordon said.

While it was a day to celebrate, Gordon also felt a sense of loss: A day earlier, NAACP founder W.E.B. DuBois had died.

But King’s words seemed to lift everyone’s spirits.

As King launched into the now-famous “I have a dream” portion of his speech, Gordon found himself cheering him on. “Go, brother, go,” Gordon thought. “You got it.”

Gordon says the 50th anniversary of the march will be a chance to “renew the momentum” of the fight for equality.

But he adds: “Every day is an anniversary in the struggle.”

Clarence B. Jones, a King adviser who worked on the “I have a dream” speech, was standing 50 feet behind the civil rights leader that day.

From there, Jones could see the masses of people standing “shoulder to shoulder across that lawn, their hearts beating as one, their hope on the line when hope was an increasingly scarce resource.”

Jones, who first worked for King as a defense lawyer in his 1960 tax fraud trial, is a former Dobbs Ferry resident and author of the 2008 book “What Would Martin Say?”

Before the 1963 speech, Jones said he drafted a summary of what King “might consider” saying — but not the actual words.

Jones was taken aback to see King with that draft at the lectern.

“I did not realize he was going



Clarence B. Jones, who was an adviser to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. STAFF TJN

to use that text,” Jones recalled.

But at least 10 minutes into the address, King, a Baptist preacher often at his best when speaking extemporaneously, went off script.

Jones turned to the person at his side and said of King’s rapt audience: “They’re about to go to church.”

The speech came in the wake

of demonstrations in Birmingham, Ala., that saw black protestors set upon by police dogs and sprayed with fire hoses.

“America was saying: ‘What kind of nation are we? Aren’t we better than this?’ ” Jones recounted. The speech, he said, was “a call to the conscience of America.”