REMEMBERING REFLECTING RENEWING

Local survivors of segregation remember storied legacy of King

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"I came here in the pursuit of finding freedom from racial discrimination," said the 69-year-old Bullock. "It was interesting that we had so much hope and belief – that Americans really believed in justice and believed in democracy.

"And here in 1999, Nebraska is more racist than Mississippi was in the 1940s when I was there."

In Lincoln, where she joined her husband, Hugh, in 1950, Bullock didn't see any colored-only signs. Jim Crow laws stopped at the Mason-Dixon line. No curtain separated white stares from Bullock's eyes on the bus.

"You could sit anywhere, and of course being from Mississippi I sat right up in front," she said.

But those were minor changes.

In her Southern accent, she sits in her living room at her house near 73rd and Havelock streets and talks about the disappointment and ignorance that she moved into.

As the celebration of King's birthday nears, Bullock, born four days after King, reflects on the more than half a century she has spent in Lincoln, and growing up in Mississippi in the 1940s.

Her light-brown face, framed by tight, white curly hair, shows years of struggle.

Her walls are symbols of her black pride, grace and strength.

She has a painting on her wall with a version of Mt. Rushmore in which Malcolm X, Harriet Tubman, Thurgood Marshall and King's heads are on the mountain peering down at the specks of black people visiting the monument.

She nods as she talks about how race relations have not changed in the 31 years since King was assassinated. She talks about a white supremacy that pervades American society. A need for white people to scapegoat their problems onto black people.

The 1950s in Lincoln still brought dirty looks, sub-standard housing and a black ghetto for Bullock.

"We don't hire Negroes here," was what she was told when she applied at her neighborhood Laundromat near 23rd and T streets.

Three months later she was the first black salesperson at Gold's Galleria department store downtown.

By 1960, she was president of the Lincoln chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

She went on to head countless freedom marches in Lincoln as a response to violations of civil rights across the country. She staged lunch counter sit-ins and picketed Woolworth's, drawing attention to racist hiring and serving practices.

The nation was a stormy place at that time.

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Nine black high school students – the Little Rock Nine – test the waters of integration at Central High School in Little Rock, Ark., five years after the U.S. Supreme Court declared separate but equal schools illegal. Repeated tries to enter the school result in armed National Guard escorts and crowds of angry white students.

Several months later, Minnijean Brown, one of the Little Rock Nine, dumps a bowl of chili on a jeering white student in the school cafeteria. She is suspended for six days.

It was 1957.

The Rev. Don Coleman, who went to school in the 1950s in Dayton, Ohio, did not study with other black students, even though it was then legal.

Coleman, who now heads the Lincoln chapter of MAD DADS, went through school for 12 years as the only black student.

"Once I reached the third and fourth grade, I got spoken around like I wasn't even in class ... we were encouraged to drop out of school in the sixth grade," Coleman said.

"The teachers would tell us we wouldn't amount to nothing."

After graduation, Coleman joined the military and was stationed in Primasens, Germany, as a staff sergeant teletype repairman.

But the ocean did not separate white hate and racial tensions.

"There was the superiority of the Caucasian soldiers, and there was a lot of the Ku Klux Klan thing," Coleman said. "They used to put swastikas. They used to put 'KKKs'. They used to do a lot of that in the barracks."

Back home his family told him stories of riots, violence and upheaval of societal norms.

At the same time, black police officers were only allowed to patrol certain parts of towns and could not arrest white people. Black people worked as janitors and cooks.

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A crowd of 350,000 people gathers in Washington, D.C., to support civil rights, equality and freedom. From the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, King shares a dream, as his passionate voice floats out over a silent crowd.

It was 1963.

> **"The amount of things that have been accomplished are great, but there are more that could be done."**
>
> **The Rev. Don Coleman**
> **MAD DADS director**

Gerry Henderson, a 70-year-old who has lived in Lincoln for more than 30 years, was there.

"Among the 350,000 people, you could hear a pin drop ... the whole time," Henderson said of the atmosphere during King's speech. "People listened to his speech with great concern about what he was saying.

"When you were standing there ... from the Lincoln Memorial to the Washington (Monument), people were fixed. You couldn't get up anywhere near the podium, there were so many people there."

What King told the thousands of multiracial faces that August was something that would be repeated over and over again, inspiring some; drawing mockery from others.

"The presentation of that speech rocked the country," Henderson said.

After graduating from Nebraska Wesleyan University in 1957, Henderson tried to get a promotion at the dairy factory in Grand Island where he worked through high school and college.

He told his employer he was ready to work full time.

It never happened.

"The manager was very diplomatic," he said. "'Gerry,' he says, 'I think you've gone as far as you can go as a Negro with this company.'"

Henderson then moved to the South. He moved to the heart and soul of the civil rights movement.

He doesn't like to talk about what he saw during that time. Most black people don't, he said.

"When you see a 13-year-old young lady hosed – fire hosed – and she is lifted and pushed through a store window, that leaves bad memories in your mind," Henderson said.

The peaceful-turned-brutal sit-ins, demonstrations and marches aside, Henderson had day-to-day struggles.

While visiting a relative in the 1950s in Oklahoma City, he went to a movie.

He entered the theater through an alley and watched the movie in the balcony behind a glass partition.

The floors of most Southern train stations were painted according to color – one half black, one half white.

Black people did not step on the white half.

Henderson remembers driving through a small, Southern town in the 1950s. A large billboard greeted him and other black people:

"Nigger, don't let the sun set on you," it read.

Out of the South, in Lincoln, Henderson and his wife, Josephine, bought a house in a white neighborhood in northwest Lincoln in 1961.

People threatened to burn the house down. Neighbors offered to buy it. But the Hendersons stayed.

Nearly the entire neighborhood moved.

Similar to Bullock, after living decades in Lincoln, Henderson fails to see a real difference between the North and the South.

"Students ask me because I lived in the North most of my life, and they always say, 'Isn't the North better than the South?' And I have to say 'Hell, no.'"

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For his undying effort to bring the message of unarmed social progress and brotherly love, for trudging through imprisonment and firebomb attacks on his house, and for managing to stand on top of a growing movement of nonviolence in the United States, King is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

It was 1964.

Tensions were on razor's edge in Omaha during the 1960s.

As a young black photographer for the Omaha World-Herald, Rudy Smith took pictures of the north Omaha riots in the 1960s.

He almost lost his life.

Smith's dark skin color allowed him to sneak past signs to take pictures in predominantly black north Omaha, which the National Guard had designated as off-limits.

Blacks were rioting because a young black girl in Omaha was killed as she was playing with a friend. The police officer that shot her was white.

In a calm voice, the 52-year-old Smith, who is still a photographer for the newspaper, recalls a frightening moment during that time.

"I was spotted by a couple of National Guardsmen. They called me over as they pointed a gun at me," Smith said.

"They told me to come here, called me some derogatory names.

"They said, 'We're gonna kill us one.'"

Smith was aided by people in the area and escaped death, but there would be other times that summer when he would fear for his life.

The upheaval in Omaha mirrored the rest of the country at that time.

"The same problems affecting people in Alabama, Boston, Oklahoma City and Los Angeles were affecting people here in Omaha," Smith said. "We were not excluded from dealing with these problems.

"Racism was a part of our culture. Segregation was a part of our culture."

Smith was a part of the solution.

As a regional director of the Omaha NAACP youth council from 1963-67, Smith trained young people to march, to sit in peacefully and to respond to any attacks by police or others.

Smith went on to become the first black person to graduate with a journalism degree from the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Years later, he taught photography there. The model for the class was used at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, he said.

At that time, about 50 miles west of Omaha, Paul Olson, a UNL English professor since 1957, was doing more than teaching.

He said the university regarded him as a very dangerous person because he was a staunch, outspoken believer in civil rights.

Olson is white.

He was a valuable peace-keeper during that time.

Olson remembers one year in the 1960s when he was on a fishing trip with his family in Utah. He got a call from the then-dean of the College of Arts and Sciences asking him how soon he could get back to Lincoln.

A day later, Olson returned to find out that a UNL sociology student had appeared at a rally in Omaha with now-Sen. Ernie Chambers and Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver.

The student was a teaching assistant at the time. Administrators attempted to fire him, but civil rights groups protected him. The student was re-assigned as a research assistant.

"That's how threatened (university administrators) were by somebody who felt an alliance with the black movement," Olson said.

"If you looked at the university where it stood institutionally in the mid-to-late '60s, it was deeply committed to white supremacy," he said.

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A single bullet fired from an assassin's gun pierces the back of King's neck as he stands on his hotel balcony in Memphis, Tenn. He was 39 years old.

It was April 4, 1968.

After King's shooting a police bulletin was put out for a "young, white male, well dressed."

Riots followed in major U.S. cities from coast to coast.

Thousands of miles north in Lincoln, Bullock lost all the feeling in her body.

"I remember going in the store, and somebody said, 'That Dr. King died' and I said 'Uh, uh,' so I turned around and went home.

"And I was kind of numb until he was buried."

The day he was buried, April 9, 1968, about 60 UNL students – some white, some black, some wearing black armbands as a symbol of mourning – marched from Mueller Tower on campus to downtown.

Across the Atlantic Ocean, Coleman was stunned. For him the world stopped.

After he heard the news, he gathered with the families of his company in Germany. They huddled together and prayed for peace.

"For a man to win the Nobel Peace Prize, for a man to speak peace, for a man to march for justice for everybody, (for) a man who has sat with kings and queens and presidents, and then to die for some garbage collectors," he said.

"So it wasn't just for the black man, Dr. King was there for all the races, for everybody. No matter where you sit in the food chain, you are somebody."

Although the memory of King is vivid in his mind, Coleman said the dream is still not realized. There is still more work to do.

"The amount of things that have been accomplished are great, but there are more that could be done," Coleman said.

Henderson thinks more could be done, too.

Tuesday he returned from Atlanta, where he spoke with a group of black college students.

He was upset by what he heard.

"(Young people) are able to buy houses anywhere they want. They are able to get good jobs," he said.

"So, therefore, they are too busy acquiring materialistic kinds of things to look at the social aspect of what they need to do in terms of community action.

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"Like anybody, I would like to live a long life ... but I'm not concerned about that. I just want to do God's will, and He has allowed me to go up the mountain, and I've looked over and I've seen the promised land.

"I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land. So I am happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything."

King was speaking at a garbage strike rally. It was April 3, 1968, the night before he died.

Streets, avenues and boulevards across the country bear his name. High schools, museums and awards are named after him. His peaceful face shows up on T-shirts, posters and framed pictures on coffee tables in homes such as Bullock's.

Since 1985, many U.S. citizens don't have to come in for work on his birthday. For the first time at UNL, classes are canceled.

Smith believes these things are just a small part of what King has left behind.

"As far as Dr. Martin Luther King is concerned, his legacy is alive and well," Smith said. "His contributions are very present in the mind of progressive blacks and young people.

"We will never, ever let our youth nor our race forget, not only the contributions he made, but the struggle.

"For the struggle is not over.

"It continues."