Equality Yesterday and Today

Harold Middlebrook recalls the days of Martin Luther King, Jr., and compares them to those of Black Lives Matter.

By Kaila Curry

As this year's recipient of the College of Communication and Information Diversity Award, the Reverend Harold Middlebrook, an icon of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, looked out at the young faces at the CCI Experience Diversity Banquet. The raspy and proper tone of his voice is a veneer over a soul that is pulled tight like a cable about to break. "One thing that we have not learned," he said, "is that unless all of us rise together, none of us will rise, nobody is free."

Middlebrook was ecstatic to be at the banquet, which featured multicultural dance, music, and performing arts as part of its mission to provide an inspirational diversity experience for students, faculty, and all others in attendance. "I'm always delighted to be around students," said Middlebrook. "They keep me young—or I make them feel old," He gives a jarring, hearty, and contagious laugh.

Born in Memphis on July 4, 1942, Middlebrook was a close friend of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "Dr. King was a visionary, a prophet, a philosopher, and a person who was genuinely concerned about the welfare of all humans," says Middlebrook. "He was thrust into the role as a leader of a liberation movement, which was designed not just for African Americans, but also for the liberation of all people. As a result of his work, people of all races, of all genders, of all backgrounds, could be liberated to the point where they could know that they were free, and they could share that with other people."

Middlebrook first became involved with the civil rights movement as a student in the early 1960s at Morehouse College. There, Middlebrook learned about King, who was at the time president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Middlebrook's association with the King family grew as he served as the youth minister at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, where both King and his father held pastorates.

"I don't know that when Dr. King was living that we understood anything about diversity," said Middlebrook. "I knew that when we were working, we may liberate people and people may feel free and be able to share with one another and come together."

As part of his acceptance speech, Middlebrook, who was recognized for his more than 50 years of civil rights leadership and community involvement, engaged the audience with a rational approach to controversial issues. He encouraged students at the banquet to be involved in the political process and vote.

The right to vote did not come easy

In 1965, Middlebrook directed the SCLC's Selma, Alabama, field office. On March 7, African Americans seeking voting rights, including Middlebrook, launched a march across Selma's Edmund Pettus Bridge. The day turned violent when the police brutally attacked the marchers, giving the episode the name "Bloody Sunday" and its place in history.

After the successful march a few days later and the events that followed, King chose Middlebrook to restore the morale of Selma's African American community, which was openly hostile toward the SCLC's abandonment of the town. Soon after, Middlebrook organized a voter registration campaign that resulted in the registration of 54 new voters.

On March 7, 2015, President Barack Obama and his family joined thousands of Americans in Selma to honor the sacrifice and bravery of the men and women who bled there in 1965 to gain voting rights for all African Americans. Middlebrook joined Obama in this sacred reenactment.

"I was in Selma 52 years ago, so for me going back to Selma was kind of an emotional time, because it reminded me of the struggle we had in 1965," said Middlebrook "To see the president walking that path said that we have reached another level in the whole struggle. Remember that the Selma movement was about the right to vote and voter registration. So when you see him there, then you know that we have achieved a new level of success to some degree, because we were able to elect a president that others said would never happen in this country."

The Civil Rights movement encompassed social movements in the United States whose goals were to end racial segregation and discrimination against African Americans. Black activism has evolved into the present. Today the Black Lives Matter movement campaigns against violence and perceived systematic racism toward black people. Middlebrook was asked to compare the two.

"One thing about the Black Lives Matter movement," Middlebrook said, "is that it's really designed not to just say that just black lives matter, but that all lives matter. That what happens to women, what happens to African Americans, what happens to people is important. Until we get to the point that we understand who we are and who we can be, there will always be struggle. We must work to eradicate negligence, we must work to eradicate racism, we must work to eradicate sexism. We must work as a nation not to Make America Great Again, but to make America greater than what we have now."

Clockwise from far left:
- Looking through memorabilia from the civil rights era, the Rev. Harold Middlebrook holds a photo from the night the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated.
- Middlebrook with Knoxville Mayor Randy Tyree (right).
- Middlebrook (left) and Jessie Jackson (top right) at a press conference with King
- Middlebrook in the pulpit.
- Middlebrook continues to stay active in the community.

Photos courtesy the Knoxville *News Sentinel*.