

Fifty years later, how a law and man changed America

Civil Rights Act didn't end racism, nor did it end unequal treatment.

MCT Regional News • Jan 20, 2014

This year's 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 brings added significance to today's commemoration of the birthday of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., who died fighting for the same equal rights that the federal legislation sought to guarantee.

For Brian Jarvis, the act means reminding new generations of African-Americans of the courage others sacrificed for their liberties today.

For the Rev. Regina Johnson-Phillips, the act remains "hope for a better future."

For Catholic nun, Sister Helen Weber, the act means she continues to inspire children to learn.

The landmark legislation signed by President Lyndon Johnson ended decades of legally sanctioned separate treatment in the workplace, in schools and in other public places. With the stroke of a pen, a white, southern president had dismantled decades of "Jim Crow" laws that had permitted state governments, cities and businesses to operate under a "separate but equal" doctrine – a doctrine that Congress finally decided was violating what America was all about.

The Civil Rights Act didn't end racism, nor did it end unequal treatment. And it certainly didn't end voluntary segregation in neighborhoods, churches and social clubs. But by prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin, the president and Congress gave all American citizens the legal means of fighting back in the courts when discrimination sabotaged their opportunities or their dreams.

In that sense, the Civil Rights Act became a tipping point that propelled America into to a new, very different future. Now, a half-century later, as the nation celebrates King's birthday as a federal holiday today, this newspaper brings you the perspectives of people in our community who shared how the historic legislation has impacted them, their families and the country.

A significant change

Brian Jarvis was elected in November as Beaver Creek's first black mayor. He looks at the Civil Rights Act — passed when he was 9-years-old — through the eyes of his parents, and compares their experiences to his. And he wants younger generations of African-Americans to recognize they have opportunities that previous generations of their families did not.

His father was born in the Bronx, N.Y., in 1921; his mother in Junction City, Kan., in 1920. His father served in the military, and was in charge of training recruits, black and white, at a time when blacks were barred from eating in restaurants in many parts of the country. During World War II in his mother's hometown, even prisoners of war being held in Fort Riley, Kan., were allowed to sit-in the "white section" of the movie theater in Junction City. Blacks who lived in town could not.

America "has changed significantly," Jarvis said. "The Civil Rights Act leveled the playing field. Those who chose to take full advantage of the opportunities that came about because of what happened in 1964 have done very well. Those who chose not to take advantage have not done well."

Jarvis, a Stebbins High School graduate, moved to the Dayton area in 1966 when his father returned from Vietnam and was assigned to Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. He served in the U.S. Air Force himself as a missile systems specialist, and later earned bachelor's and master's degrees in computer science from Wright State University. He worked for several aerospace companies before retiring in July 2010 from Northrop Grumman Corp.

When he speaks to incoming African-American freshmen who are headed to his alma mater, Jarvis said his message is clear: the generations before you opened the door, and it's up to you to step through that door.

"The trail has been blazed," he said.

A new beginning

Rev. Regina Johnson-Phillips, founder and president of the Oasis Center for Families and Children in Hamilton, was born and raised in Hamilton. But her parents were from Troy, Ala., and she recalls frequent trips she took as a child to visit grandparents.

Inevitably, during those trips, shortly after her parents' car crossed the Mason-Dixon line sporting Ohio license plates, a law-enforcement officer would pull the family's car over and demand to know what they were doing. Officers forced her father to open the trunk to show that all that was inside was pound cake and a picnic lunch.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964, Johnson-Phillips said, represented "a four-letter word: hope. We all could hope for a better future, for equality in life."

The equality didn't happen overnight, as many expected it would. And the law didn't eliminate oppression, Johnson-Phillips said. But it was a start.

"It was the beginning of a process," she said. "Changing people's hearts take longer than just putting words on paper."

A front seat on the bus

Herbert Martin, 80, grew up in Birmingham, Ala., one of the epicenters of the civil rights movement, and where segregation was a way of life.

But it was not until his family moved to Toledo that he realized blacks should not behave as if they were inferior to whites. It took one bus ride with his father to learn that lesson.

"We got on the bus and (my father) went to pay the bills. I got on the bus and went all the way to the back of the bus. He paid for our fares, and he came back and sat beside me. And very quietly he said, 'You don't have to ride in the back of the bus any longer,'" said Martin, who was a teenager at the time. "And I thought, 'Well, that's strange. We've always sat in the back of the bus, why suddenly has it changed?'"

His father, a foundry worker, never explained why things were different, so Martin decided to test the waters the next time he got on the bus.

"So one day when I was coming home from high school, I decided that I would get on the street car, and I would sit immediately behind the bus driver and if he said you must move to the back of the bus, depending on whether I was embarrassed, I would get off the bus if he said move to the back of the bus or if I was comfortable, I would move to the back of the bus. Well, I sat behind him and he didn't say anything," Martin said.

Martin was 30 when the Civil Rights Act passed and was a clerical worker at a publishing house in New York.

He said the law created new opportunities for blacks to extend their education, and he took advantage it, especially since his parents never graduated from high school.

"I could attend the universities and get an education," he said.

Martin received his undergraduate degree from the University of Toledo, a master's from Middlebury College and a doctorate from Carnegie Mellon University. He is now a professor emeritus at the University of Dayton, and is noted for performing as Paul Laurence Dunbar, a Dayton native and one of America's best poets.

'A long way to go'

Every day, Sister Helen Weber sees the limitations to what the Civil Rights Act of 1964 has been able to accomplish in its 50 years.

"The legislation was great, the motivation for it was great, but its positive impact has been very slow to trickle down into the community," said Weber, member of the Sisters of the Precious Blood and director of the Brunner Literacy Center in Trotwood.

The center works with adults to boost their reading skills and helps many of them get their high school equivalency degree. But the need is great, Weber said.

Some adults come to the center with a third- or fourth-grade reading level. "They're working to get the same advantages that most of society has, but they have not received the schooling," Weber said.

Weber laments how Ohio's school-funding system depends on local funding and property taxes because she believes it is flawed and works against the poor.

"The opportunities are still few and far between for people in poverty, and many of them are African-Americans," Weber said. "The system has not caught up with the great need out there.

"We have a long way to go."

Breaking barriers

Lorana M. Kelly was just 20 when the act became law, and she recalled how change was gradual for blacks in Dayton. Prior to its passage, blacks sat in the back of the bus, had to watch movies in segregated balconies and received lower wages compared to whites.

She remembered the conversation her parents — her father, a cement contractor, and her mother, a nursing home worker — had with her and two siblings about how America operated. "They tried to explain to us that there is a different world between whites and blacks, that white people had the better jobs, had more money and were respected more than we were," she said.

But Kelley would play a role integrating McCrory's on South Main Street in Dayton.

"At the time, no blacks worked on the first-floor. We had to work in the basement," Kelly said. "No blacks were cashiers. So, (civil rights activists) Jessie Gooding and W.S. McIntosh were fighting the discrimination within our city, so that gave me the opportunity to be a cashier on the first-floor of the Five and 10 cent store, and that was great."

At the time, Kelly didn't consider blacks prohibited from working on the first-floor was discrimination. It was just the way things were, she thought.

"I really didn't think about it being a discrimination in our city ... until (McIntosh and Gooding) started fighting for those positions," she said. "And when I realized, well that is true, we are being discriminated. So, it made me kind of getting used to fighting for different things. Ever since then, I have been out picketing things with different groups," she said.

She said while discrimination still exists, life for African-Americans is better.

"Blacks are beginning to move forward. We have a black president and representatives," she said. "(Civil Rights Act) opened up a gate for people to be able to go, as I say, into the white world. Before, you never heard of people running for commissioner or governor back in those days (prior to the act's passage). So it helped a lot."