

Living his dream: A new generation fights for rights King envisioned

By Al Jazeera, adapted by Newsela staff on 01.18.19

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Yolanda Renee King (left), granddaughter of Martin Luther King Jr., joins hands with Parkland student Jaclyn Corin as she speaks onstage at March For Our Lives on March 24, 2018, in Washington, D.C. Photo by: Paul Morigi/Getty Images for March For Our Lives

When he found out Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated, Freeman Hrabowski felt like there had been a death in the family.

In 1968, Hrabowski was a 17-year-old, math-obsessed student at Hampton University.

Hrabowski knew King better than most.

As a 12-year-old boy, he marched to protest his city's rigid segregation of white and black students at schools. The schools with black students got old textbooks and the buildings were in disrepair. There were endless reminders that the people in charge did not allow him full humanity.

Hrabowski remembers King speaking at his family's church and saying that, if the children marched for equal rights, the country could not turn away.

Testing Itself Against People In Power

Something similar has been happening today. A new generation of young activists is testing itself against people in power.

Several prominent black leaders of the movement for stricter gun laws emerged after the February 2018 school shooting in Parkland, Florida. Many are not yet old enough to vote. They include 12-year-old Naomi Wadler and 10-year-old Yolanda Renee King, King's granddaughter.

Black Lives Matter is an activist-led movement. It is protesting against discrimination toward black people in the criminal justice system. The movement has chapters across the country. They draw much of their membership from activists in their teens and twenties.

Continuing A Tradition

Among them is 25-year-old Tiffany Burks. She is an organizer with Black Lives Matter in Broward County, Florida. Burks said that she sees her work as continuing a tradition set by King and other civil rights leaders.

"The type of organizer I am relies on shared wisdom from people who have done this work in the past," Burks said. She is inspired by King, as well as lesser-known leaders like Eula Johnson and Fannie Lou Hamer.

Burks had long felt passionate about social justice. However, it was the 2016 police shootings of Alton Sterling, Michael Eugene Wilson Jr. and Gregory Frazier that spurred her to become a community organizer with Black Lives Matter Alliance Broward.

When some 800 people turned out for the first action she organized, she felt certain she had chosen the right path.

Black Lives Matter Provides Crash Education

Burks described her time with Black Lives Matter as a crash education in all the U.S. history omitted from standard high school courses. That included the history of black feminist thinkers from the 1960s and 1970s, and the role of youth in the civil rights movement.

She has worked on a number of campaigns. One recent success was an effort to rename several streets in Hollywood, Florida. The streets, which ran through predominantly black communities, had been named after Confederate leaders from the Civil War.

After the Parkland shooting last February, Burks began working with black student survivors who felt invisible in the national debate over gun control.

She helped them organize a press conference last March. Students told reporters that, while mass shootings like Parkland produce national outrage, nothing similar follows police shootings of unarmed black people. Individual gun homicides result in far more deaths than mass shootings and disproportionately affect black youth. Yet, they receive a fraction of the attention paid to high-profile shootings.

After the Parkland shooting, some people suggested plans like stationing police in public high schools. Such policies could make students of color feel even less safe, Burks said.

A Difficult But Essential Conversation

Instead, she suggested examining the complex factors underlying gun violence. Burks thinks that while white privilege and power in the United States are difficult concepts to talk about, the conversation is essential.

Like civil rights activists 50 years ago, Burks sees children and teens as uniquely capable of sparking that conversation. "Somehow, young people bring out the humanity in folks who might otherwise have been indifferent," she said.

In Wisconsin, 15-year-old Alemitu Caldart took part in a four-day, 50-mile march for stricter gun laws last March. It was inspired by King's 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. Caldart and the other marchers ended in Janesville, Wisconsin, home of former Congressman Paul Ryan. They aimed to call out Ryan's consistent opposition to gun control legislation.

"I am tired of seeing all these lives being taken every single day due to the inaction of our elected officials," Caldart said.

Opposition to gun control often seems impossible to overcome. Still, Caldart takes inspiration from the civil rights movement. The activists persevered even when success felt impossible. They ultimately saw sweeping changes in U.S. laws.

Today, Freeman Hrabowski is president of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC). He sees parallels between King's struggle for civil rights and today's young activists.

Picking Up The Slack

"Young people are crying out and taking action because adults have not done enough," Hrabowski said.

Activists face many challenges. April 2018 marked the 50-year anniversary of King's death. The anniversary arrived as many key achievements of the civil rights era seem weakened. A recent report from the Eisenhower Foundation warned of neighborhood and school re-segregation. It also talked about how some white supremacists, those with the hateful belief that white people are better than people of other races, have become bolder.

Still, Hrabowski is firm in his belief that the more challenges you face, "the more you realize there is always hope."

After the initial shock, King's assassination did not destroy Hrabowski's hope for a more just country. Hrabowski carried that hope with him. He started a career in education. He helped make UMBC the university that, today, produces more black graduates with doctorate degrees than any other U.S. school. A doctorate degree is the highest level of academic degree and requires years of additional studies after college.

Hrabowski sees his university, with its diverse student body, as the fulfillment of King's vision.

"To see kids of all races from around the world connecting together and focusing on ideas, it is exactly what Dr. King's dream was."

Quiz

1 Which piece of evidence from the article BEST explains how current activism is related to King's actions as a leader of the civil rights movement?

- (A) When he found out Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated, Freeman Hrabowski felt like there had been a death in the family.
- (B) Still, Hrabowski is firm in his belief that the more challenges you face, "the more you realize there is always hope."
- (C) After the initial shock, King's assassination did not destroy Hrabowski's hope for a more just country.
- (D) "To see kids of all races from around the world connecting together and focusing on ideas, it is exactly what Dr. King's dream was."

2 Read the list of details from the article.

1. *When some 800 people turned out for the first action she organized, she felt certain she had chosen the right path.*
2. *Burks thinks that while white privilege and power in the United States are difficult concepts to talk about, the conversation is essential.*
3. *"I am tired of seeing all these lives being taken every single day due to the inaction of our elected officials," Caldart said.*
4. *The activists persevered even when success felt impossible. They ultimately saw sweeping changes in U.S. laws.*

Which two details, taken together, provide the BEST evidence to support the idea that fighting for change can be challenging?

- (A) 1 and 2
- (B) 1 and 3
- (C) 2 and 4
- (D) 1 and 4

- 3 Which of the following MOST influenced Tiffany Burks' decision to get involved with Black Lives Matter?
- (A) the police shootings of Alton Sterling, Michael Eugene Wilson Jr. and Gregory Frazier
 - (B) the realization that her high school history classes did not teach her about black feminist thinkers
 - (C) the press conference held last March with student survivors from the Parkland shooting
 - (D) the 50-year anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.
- 4 According to the article, why did Alemitu Caldart participate in a four-day, 50-mile march?
- (A) to recreate Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama
 - (B) to show support for gun control legislation while calling out Paul Ryan's opposition to it
 - (C) to recruit more youth across the state of Wisconsin to become activists for stricter gun laws
 - (D) to protest a proposal to station police officers in public high schools in response to mass shootings

Answer Key

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