

Marylanders recall a historic day in the summer of 1963 and its effect on their lives

By: Jonathan Pitts

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ABSTRACT

The following summer, when the Civil Rights Act became law, Dennison thought of Aug. 28, 1963 -- "the first time in my life I saw a people's movement affect government policies." Apter's father, David, a public relations man, had worked with early leaders of the civil rights movement.

FULL TEXT

Half a century ago this Wednesday, as a bright sun climbed the sky above downtown Washington, Douglas B. Sands, then 29, stood a few hundred feet from the Lincoln Memorial and looked out over the National Mall in wonder.

It was 8:30 in the morning on Aug. 28, 1963. The long-awaited March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom would not begin for 2 1/2 hours. People were flooding in by the thousands, gathering by the Reflecting Pool like members of an extended family assembling for a picnic.

"To see so many people of all ages and races coming together so peacefully -- that was much bigger and better than any of us expected," recalls Sands, whose work on Baltimore's civil rights scene had taught him that even those inside the movement could rarely speak with a single voice.

A quarter of a million people -- including 15,000 Marylanders, by one estimate -- turned out to take a stand on behalf of racial justice on what would become a landmark day in American history, one that ended with a speech for the ages.

At the time, many observers feared it would end in violence, others thought it would have no effect, and no one knew how it would turn out.

To many on the Mall and to the millions who watched it on TV, the meaning of the March on Washington only became clear as the day unfolded or in the following weeks.

Many felt its power on the spot, others as the months and years went by.

Some who missed it swore to rededicate themselves to the movement.

The march, it is said, helped persuade Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act a year later. Marylanders who remember it hope its lessons might yet inform our discussions of race, politics and equal rights.

Delightfully packed

For Joyce Dennison, the March on Washington meant a chance to build on the civil rights successes she'd seen after moving from her liberal hometown of Kennett Square, Pa., to still largely segregated Baltimore.

In February 1963, she was one of hundreds of college students jailed for protesting a policy that barred blacks from the Northwood Shopping Center near the Morgan State campus. The action helped force the owners to integrate. But nothing could have prepared her for the experience of Aug. 28.

The day began when Dennison, like thousands across the region, boarded a chartered bus. The atmosphere on the bus was jubilant, she says.

And the roads were packed.

"Imagine busload after busload on I-95 and I-40, [as though they were] driving to Ocean City on Memorial Day weekend, only 500-fold," she says.

The march was, too -- only more so. Once you got into "that sea of people, whoever you were walking with, it was like you knew [that person] all your life," says Dennison, 71, a retired Baltimore schoolteacher. "It didn't matter what socioeconomic group, religion or ethnicity you belonged to. There was a great feeling of humanity."

By the time the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. took the podium, Dennison had found a spot at the far end of the Reflecting Pool. She found herself hoping no sniper would take aim at King. But across that distance, as the amplified sound wafted in and out, two life-giving phrases came through loud and clear: "all of God's children" and "I have a dream."

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Go-fer to history

At 17, Marc Apter of Annapolis had a stroke of dumb luck. He'd never been a political activist. But he still got to hear King speak from 20 feet away.

Apter's father, David, a public relations man, had worked with early leaders of the civil rights movement. As the day of the march approached, David Apter volunteered his services to organizers. But at work, his bosses declined to give him time off.

So he quit, took the summer gig for nothing and made a go-fer of his son, whose job would be to run messages from the press tent to the speaker's podium.

Marc Apter recalls being impressed by the diversity and serenity of the crowd. He was positively wowed when he got to stand next to Joan Baez. "I was a kid," he explains. As the day went on, he saw history.

March leaders vetted every speech before it was given that day. One of Apter's duties was to carry the final scripts to the podium. A little after 4 o'clock, someone gave him King's speech.

Only dimly sensing its importance, he lugged it up the steps, handed it to an aide, and was about to return to the tent when King began speaking.

"I heard those resonant tones and stopped," says Apter, 68. He stood a bit behind King and to one side until the speech was over.

Over the next few days, as pundits aired their views, the speech began to strike him as historic. Years later, a PR man himself, he ran press operations for the 20th and 30th anniversary marches, which drew more than 400,000 people combined.

Union of a broader base

Larry Gibson would never have skipped the rally. At 21, he was already a player on the local civil rights scene. But he was so immersed in the movement that he missed the main event.

A native of Baltimore, he was the recently elected student body president at Howard University. He was also chairman of a coalition of students lobbying Congress to get the Civil Rights Act enacted.

He had briefly met King, Malcolm X and other luminaries. He'd heard their speeches and had given plenty of his own. His goal that day was to march.

As the day began at the Mall, he says, he was amazed to see so many nonblacks -- 30 percent to 40 percent, he guessed. And as he joined the throng quietly moving from the Washington Monument to the Memorial, he was surprised to find himself among marchers in military-style folded paper hats.

They were members of the United Auto Workers, a group he never imagined seeing.

"I hadn't paid much attention to the involvement of unions in the movement," he recalls. "That told me there was a broader base of support for [civil rights] legislation and improvements than I'd realized. That gave a stronger sense of hope."

The series of 12 formal speeches began in early afternoon. He'd heard many of the orators in the past and didn't expect they'd say anything surprising. So he left.

Now a professor at the University of Maryland School of Law and the author of a recent biography of Thurgood Marshall, Gibson, 71, saw King's "I Have a Dream" speech on a campus TV.

It was good, he recalls, as good as others he'd heard King give. Over time, it was singled out as a game-changer.

He's still trying not to kick himself:

"If we always knew what was about to happen in life, we'd never miss a thing."

From a distance

Two stalwarts of Baltimore's civil rights scene at the time, John Roemer and Jim Griffin, missed the march altogether. But it changed them both.

Roemer, 75, the longtime executive director of the Maryland chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, figured the day would be a merely symbolic exercise.

"I was interested in demonstrations that would close down the bad guys," says Roemer, who had helped do that at segregated Gwynn Oak Park amusement park and a number of whites-only restaurants. "I decided that one could do without me."

He stayed home and watched it on TV.

Griffin, 81, says some who know him will be surprised to hear he wasn't even interested in civil rights at the time. A physical therapist, he followed the day's events on TV as he visited clients.

As Roemer looked on at his home in Parkton, the multiracial crowd swelled to massive proportions, coalescing into a statement for the ages.

"There really were hundreds of thousands of Americans willing to go to Washington to be heard on these issues," he says. "That was the day we knew we were going to win."

Griffin had spent most of his adult life years focusing on getting his education. But he was "happy as a lark to see so many people of all races and ages participating."

That night, a white friend asked why he hadn't been at the Mall. He was ashamed to have no good answer.

The next day, he went to the North Avenue headquarters of the Congress on Racial Equality and signed up. Within two months, he was chapter president. Over the next five years, he helped overturn race-tinged state public-accommodations laws.

Roemer, who managed to squeeze in 35 years teaching high school history, never tired of showing films of the March on Washington, especially of King's speech, an oration that "beautifully combined the drive of the civil rights movement with traditional American values."

He'd like to have been there, he says.

'He already had 'em'

Sands, who grew up in rural Cooksville in the 1940s, had long helped drive the local civil rights movement.

He'd picketed restaurants, including the lunch counters at Read's drugstores. He'd organized against Northwood in the 1950s and served on a statewide commission on "interracial problems" after that.

More recently, he'd been named to the Office of Special Protocol Services in the State Department, an agency the Kennedy administration created to ensure African diplomats received humane treatment throughout Maryland in the 1960s.

In that role, he was asked to serve as a marshal for the 1963 March on Washington. His job was to usher diplomats and make sure marchers got any help they needed.

As the hours passed, he thought of the problems many marchers must have faced in their own communities just to get to this point. He was overjoyed to see that the nation's top civil rights organizations had shelved their usual disagreements over tactics to make the day happen.

At some point in the afternoon, everything seemed so harmonious that he left his post to watch the speeches. No one seemed to mind. He was no more than 100 yards away when King got up.

He, too, had heard the minister speak before, often with plenty of theatrics. What he noticed this time was that King

used a more serene tone.

A quarter of a million people seemed to be listening intently.

"He already had 'em," says Sands, 71, now lead pastor at White Rock Methodist Church in Sykesville.

As King wove Scripture and history with pleas for repurposed unity, his oration stood out as the best of the 12 that day, Sands says, in large part because it encapsulated them all: "If you listened to that one speech, you knew what the whole thing was about."

Has the dream King spoke of been realized?

To Sands, America has come a long way in 50 years, but it still has a ways to travel. On that day, though, as King reached the climax of his oration with the line, "Thank God Almighty, I'm free at last," all Sands could think to do was find strangers to hug.

As the minister recalls, they all hugged back.

"What a day," Sands says, his baritone voice a little dreamy at the memory. "And to be as close as I was? My goodness, what a blessing."

jonathan.pitts@baltsun.com

Credit: THE BALTIMORE SUN

Illustration

Photo(s); Caption: Photo: The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., waves to the crowd from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on Aug. 28, 1963, during the March on Washington. Photo: The Rev. Douglas B. Sands: "To see so many people of all ages and races coming together so peacefully -- that was much bigger and better than any of us expected." Photo: Joyce Dennison: "Imagine busload after busload on I-95 and I-40, [as though they were] driving to Ocean City on Memorial Day weekend, only 500-fold." Photo: Larry Gibson: "I hadn't paid much attention to the involvement of unions. ... That told me there was a broader base of support for [civil rights] legislation and improvements than I'd realized." Photo: John Roemer: "There really were hundreds of thousands of Americans willing to go to Washington to be heard on these issues." Photo: Marc Apter: "I heard those resonant tones and stopped" when the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. started to speak. Photo: Jim Griffin: He was "happy as a lark to see so many people of all races and ages participating" in the march.

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