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HEADLINE: UMBC president reflects on a hero and his dream;
King would find cause now for despair, hope, he says

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BODY:

Marching beside the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. 40 years ago in Birmingham, Ala., 12-year-old Freeman A. Hrabowski III never dreamed that he - or any other African-American - would someday head a majority-white university.

It was 1963, two years before the flood of civil rights legislation of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. King, in his famous letter from the Birmingham jail, had called the city the most segregated in the United States, a place with an "ugly record of brutality," where four girls of Hrabowski's age had been killed in a church bombing, and where he and his family were barred from restaurants, amusement parks and drinking fountains.

Four decades later, Hrabowski is president of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. He's had the job for nearly 11 years, and he credits King for much of his success.

He's made a lifetime study of King, reading hundreds of children's essays about the slain civil rights leader that are sent his way, giving interviews and contemplating King's legacy.

"He is probably our most authentic modern hero and certainly our first African-American hero," says Hrabowski, 52. "He was also flawed, but what hero wasn't? So was Washington, so was Jefferson. What my study of King has taught me is that a person can be imperfect and still do great things."
Young activist

As the expression goes, Hrabowski has the bona fides to comment on King, who would have been 74 today. With his parents' blessing, Hrabowski joined the Birmingham demonstrations led by King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

"How simple things seemed in retrospect," Hrabowski remembers. "We had three television stations, two

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commercial and one educational, and my parents made me watch the educational one." Even the demonstrations had "simple purposes," says Hrabowski.

"You know what? All we were asking to do as children was to walk to the steps of City Hall and pray for freedom - the freedom to do what every other child in America could do. That's all we were asking."

In one protest, Hrabowski was spat on by Eugene "Bull" Connor, Birmingham's notorious commissioner of public safety. "Even at that young age, I could see he was frustrated. He was losing control, and the whole world was watching," Hrabowski says.

With other children and adults who had been rounded up for marching without a permit, the young Hrabowski spent a terrifying five days in the Birmingham city jail - the same jail from which King dispatched the famous letter in which he laid out the grounds for nonviolent protest.

A few months later in 1963, King delivered his riveting "I Have a Dream" speech from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington. Forty years later, Hrabowski says that some of the civil rights leader's dreams have been fulfilled.

"All of the segregation laws are gone. Condoleezza Rice (whose father was Hrabowski's high school counselor) couldn't drink at a public water fountain in Birmingham or visit Funtown," the city's segregated amusement park.

The park's whites-only rules, King's letter from jail said, caused "ominous clouds of inferiority" to form in the "little mental skies" of black children.

"Now Condoleezza is a presidential adviser," says Hrabowski, "and there are more opportunities for African-Americans than ever in history. Education, King knew, would make it possible. That's why, if you look at his writing and speeches, much of it was directed at children."

Looking at 2003

And yet, Hrabowski says, King would look around in 2003 "and see that as a society we still haven't learned to talk about the problems he was addressing, particularly race relations."

And, says Hrabowski, he would see an economically stratified society in which the rich get richer and the poor of all races fall increasingly out of reach of jobs that require high-level skills. He'd see drugs and alcohol "tearing apart families, white and black."

And see black-on-black crime, such as the firebombing of the Dawson family home in East Baltimore in October. "King would have seen that as an act of self-hatred," says Hrabowski.

Because the civil rights movement succeeded in removing legal barriers, Hrabowski says, a King of the early 21st century would focus on economic and educational inequality. That's a task, he observes, that seems enormously more complex, and in some ways more challenging, than wiping out Jim Crow laws.

Consider the lowly water fountain, Hrabowski says. Of course, blacks can drink from any public fountain in 2002, but the fountains in many of their segregated inner-city schools haven't worked for years.

Similarly, "King and I could go to any restaurant today and be served without a problem, but many of our fellow blacks - and whites, too, for that matter - don't go to restaurants today because they can't afford it."

Education is key

The "transforming power of education," Hrabowski says, is the part of King's message with which he most identifies. He has lectured widely on the subject and co-wrote two books on the education of African-American boys and girls.

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"King would say we need to teach children to read and dream about something other than becoming a professional basketball player," says the president of UMBC, which takes great pride in having established a national dynasty in intercollegiate chess.

King's nonviolent movement coincided with more than a decade of campus demonstrations, first for civil rights, later to protest American involvement in Vietnam. Would King be disappointed that today's college students seem more self-absorbed, less interested in sit-ins and marches for civil rights and against war?

It's a false impression, says Hrabowski. Today's students have the same passion and concern; they're simply directing it differently.
Different outlets

"Students today are remarkably selfless, far more so than people of my generation might expect," he says. "Large numbers of them are working as tutors and advisers or in AmeriCorps," the national service program.

King would like that, says Hrabowski, because in today's world the children of the poor "aren't likely to acquire the skills and values necessary to move out of poverty unless they get exceptional help from people like these college kids.

"That's the King dream," he says.

GRAPHIC: Photo(s), 1. Freeman A. Hrabowski III marched with King in 1963.; 2. (APPEARED IN THE HOWARD EDITION ONLY) "King would say we need to teach children to read and dream about something other than becoming a professional basketball player," says UMBC President Freeman A. Hrabowski III.; M. LOPOSSAY RIESSER : SUN STAFF

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