

Lawyer recalls Dr. King visit

Civil rights leader
spoke at K-State
on Jan. 18, 1968

By Phil Anderson
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Topeka lawyer Dan Lykins was a senior at Kansas State University in Manhattan when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke at Ahearn Fieldhouse on Jan. 18, 1968.

"It was a moment, a time, I'll never forget," Lykins said. "Never, ever, ever."

Lykins, 60, an Atchison native and cousin of former Kansas congressman Jim Slattery, said he got to the fieldhouse early that day, taking a front-row seat. The fieldhouse is the former home to the Kansas State men's and women's basketball teams.

King's speech mesmerized the capacity audience, which was composed mostly of whites, Lykins said.

"You could hear a pin drop at times," Lykins said. "At other times, there was a lot of applause."

No one knew it at the time, but it would mark the last speech on a college campus by King, who was assassinated at age 39 less than three months later on April 4, 1968, in Memphis, Tenn.

For years, Lykins has had his own dream: to mark the day that King came to Kansas State.

At noon Friday, exactly 39 years since the civil rights leader's speech, Lykins' dream will become a reality when a bronze bust of King will be dedicated outdoors on the southeast side of Ahearn Fieldhouse. The dedication is the culmination of the university's Martin Luther King Jr. Observance Week.

A number of people, most of whom have connections with Kansas State, donated to the \$17,500 project. Salina sculptor Richard Bergen made the sculpture, which will sit atop a black African granite base on a pedestal with the names of various donors.

"It's going to be a great day at Kansas State," said Lykins, a member of the Kansas Board of Regents since 2005. "I've been trying to get some recognition for his day at Kansas State, and now it's going to happen. It took a long time, but if you never give up, good things will happen."

In March 1968, Robert Kennedy also paid a visit to Manhattan and spoke on the same platform as King in Ahearn Fieldhouse.

Lykins worked on Kennedy's presidential campaign before the senator was assassinated in June in Los Angeles.

To this day, Lykins said, he continues to draw inspiration from the visits of King and Kennedy to Kansas State. Lykins has run unsuccessfully on the Democratic ticket for Kansas' 2nd District seat in the U.S. Congress, as well as for state attorney general.

"I think both of them were basically after the same thing — justice for all people," Lykins said. "They were facing an uphill battle: Dr. King, civil rights, and Kennedy, the Vietnam War."

Friday's celebration also will include the honorary naming of 17th Street, which runs by Ahearn Fieldhouse, as Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Drive.

Lykins said the placement of King's bust outside Ahearn Fieldhouse is most fitting.

"Anytime I go into Ahearn Fieldhouse, I feel like his presence is still there," Lykins said. "The fact that K-State invited him, I think, said something for K-State back in '68."

"I think K-State wanted to have as much diversity as it could and let students be around as many different ideas as they could."

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