

LIVING history

King's 1968 campus visit still remembered

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Martin Luther King Jr. forever will be intertwined into K-State history.

At 10 a.m. Jan. 19, 1968, just 2 1/2 months before he was assassinated, King spoke to a crowd of more than 7,000 people in Ahearn Field House.

His speech, "The Future of Integration," eloquently addressed the distance that still needed to be forged

in narrowing the racial divide of the day.

Natacha Phelps, junior in accounting, said she first learned of King's visit Monday. For her, knowing this piece of history enhances the meaning of Martin Luther King Jr. Week.

"It makes it seem like Manhattan was more a part of what was happening at the time," Phelps said. "It helps make the holiday more tied with our history."

Betsy Bergen, professor of family studies and human services, said she went to the convocation in 1968. Bergen likened seeing King at that time to seeing any famous person today. She said that throughout her tenure at K-State, she always has made it a habit to go to important lectures.

"I remember seeing and listening to him," Bergen said. "At the time, it was more like going to see any famous person."

Bergen said the significance of the lecture did not hit home with her until nearly a decade later.

"Now, I look back and see what a huge leader he was and can see all of the differences he made in the world," Bergen said. "We did not see the significance of his speaking at K-State until later."

Although having a speaker like King come to K-State might seem like a momentous event for students today, Tom Palmer, the Collegian staff member who covered King's speech and now writes for the Boston Globe, said he did not remember covering King's speech.

"I remember well the day a few months later in the Collegian news room, and I heard of the assassination of Martin Luther King," Palmer said.

"I don't remember covering that speech."

Palmer said King's speech was just one of many phenomenal speeches given that year at K-State.

"Dr. King was a strong voice at the time. His visit to K-State was one of many in the civil rights community," Palmer said. "Since his death, a new appreciation of what he stood for has grown with his memory."

K-State was not the same place when King visited as it is today. Black residents were not allowed to live in certain parts of Manhattan, and black students could not pledge fraternities or sororities.

Bergen said there was definite racial tension on campus at that time.



University Archives

Martin Luther King Jr. and former K-State President James McCain talk during King's visit to the university where he delivered his speech in 1968. Two and a half months after King's visit, he was assassinated by James Earl Ray.

V.F. CONVOCATION
KING, MARTIN LUTHER, JR.
JAN. 19, 1968

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"It was a tense period that fall and spring," Bergen said. "There was a lack of understanding on both sides of the spectrum."

After hearing King speak at

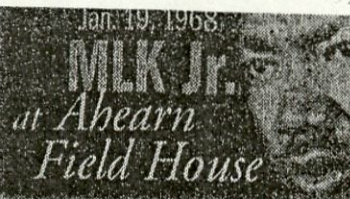
K-State, Bergen said the news of his assassination a few months later affected the K-State community.

"I was shocked to hear he was shot," Bergen said. "This man was here, and he was such an important person. It made us wonder what was happening at that time in a nation that we would shoot

someone like him."

Bergen questioned if King would have been as honored today if he had lived.

"If he had not died, would he have been as well-known?" Bergen said. "Would we honor him if he had lived? I can't answer these questions, They are just important thoughts."



"America has failed to hear the plight of the Negro, and he is calling for attention. As long as justice is postponed, we will be on the verge of social disruption."

— *Kansas State Collegian*,
Jan. 19, 1968

"... And there is another myth that is disseminated a great deal. It is the notion that legislation has no role to play in establishing justice and in moving toward an integrated society."

"... There comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular."

"... Through such maladjustment, we will be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man's inhumanity to man, to the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice..."

"Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty! We are free at last!"

— excerpts of Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech Jan. 19, 1968, at Ahearn Field House are courtesy of University Archives.