

Remembering Rev. King's last visit to LI

Lasting images of King on LI

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In this 40th-anniversary year of the civil rights leader's assassination, Martin Luther King Day will be observed Monday with particular poignancy. Especially for those who saw him in person and heard his message of nonviolence in his last days.

"I remember being so struck by his presence," says Lynda Day of Freeport, recalling her first and New York's last living encounter with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. on March 28, 1968. Day was 14 and vice president of South Side Junior High School's student government, which, along with the Poor People's Campaign Committee of Long Island, cosponsored King's appearance in Rockville Centre. Eight days later, he was shot in Memphis.

"It was devastating to me and my family," recalls Day, who now chairs the Africana Studies Department at Brooklyn College. "He was a hero, and to have seen him up close so recently made it almost like a death in the family. ... His speech here on Long Island made such an impression on me."

King had spoken a few times before on Long Island, including at Hofstra University, where he received an honorary degree a year after being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. His Rockville Centre speech, attended by a mostly white audience of about 1,000, focused on the Vietnam War, with his universal themes concerning poverty and oppression interwoven. It's no different in Saigon than in Selma, he suggested.

"That was the first time I saw King as a truly national figure," says Day, author of "Making a Way to Freedom: A History of African Americans on Long Island" (Heart of the Lakes Press). "He wasn't representing black people alone. He was talking about the human condition. He was taking a world stage. Sometimes I wonder if that's not the real reason he was assassinated."

On March 31, three days after King's speech here, President Lyndon Johnson announced he would not seek his party's nomination for re-election. On April 4, King was dead.

"I was very much struck by one image," Day says of the last moment she would see him alive. "Dr. King was mobbed. There didn't seem to be any security. I remembered him being sort of carried away, physically, moved by a sea of people. He had a look of resignation on his face," she adds, "like a man who knows his fate is not his own."

On the eve of last week's New Hampshire primary, Day was asked what King might have thought of Sen. Barack Obama's presidential candidacy, had he lived to see Obama's win in Iowa, a largely white, rural state. "He would have thought of it as a confirmation of his 'I Have a Dream' speech," Day said, "that a man should be judged by the content of his character, not the color of his skin."