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MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

Special Edition

In celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s 67th birthday, and in remembrance of his achievements.

SECTION

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You Are Somebody: Words To Live By

Martin Luther King Jr. Learns About Discrimination Early In Childhood

Martin Luther King, Jr., was born on January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, Georgia, and learned about racial discrimination at an early age.

When he was five years old, his most frequent playmate was a white boy whose father owned a neighborhood grocery store. One day, out of the blue, the boy's parents told Martin to go away and not play with their son any longer. Bewildered, Martin asked why. "Because we are white and you are colored," they said.

At home, Martin cried to his mother, "Why don't white people like us?" She dropped everything and for several hours explained the nature of race relations in America, the tragedy of slavery and of segregation. She told him to hold his head high and not let what whites said and did affect him.

"You must never feel that you are less than anybody else," she said. "You must always feel that you are somebody."

King never really doubted that, but like every southern black, he lived in a segregated, unequal society.

"On the one hand, my mother taught me that I should feel a sense of somebodiness," he later explained. "On the other hand, I had to go out and face the system, which stared me in the face every day, saying 'You are less than,' 'you are not equal to.' So this was a real tension within."

Throughout the South of King's youth, the system of segregation determined the patterns of life. Blacks attended separate schools from whites, were barred from pools and parks where whites swam and played, from cafes and hotels where whites ate and slept.

It took a brave person to challenge the system. Yet in small ways blacks did their best to resist humiliation.

When King was a child, his father took him to buy a pair of shoes at a white-owned store in Atlanta. Father and son took seats in front, near the window. A clerk approached and said, "I'll be happy to wait on you if you'll just move to those seats at the rear of the store."

"Nothing wrong with these seats," the elder King replied.

"Sorry but you'll have to go back there."

Martin's father stayed put. "We'll buy shoes sitting here or we won't buy shoes at all," he insisted.

The clerk shrugged and walked off. In a minute or two, King got up, took Martin by the hand, and strode from the store. On the sidewalk, he looked at his son and in a voice flushed with anger said, "I don't care how long I have to live with this system, I am never going to accept it. I'll oppose it till the day I die!"

Another time young Martin was riding with his father when a policeman pulled them over for a traffic violation. "Boy, show me your license," the officer drawled. The elder King exploded. Pointing at Martin, he shouted, "Do you see this child here? That's a boy

there. I'm a man. I'm Reverend King." Indeed he was. The Reverend Martin Luther King, Sr., pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church, a leader of black Atlanta, demanded and claimed respect. In his youth, he had been known as Mike, and he had come up the hard way. Born in 1899, he was from an unhappy

family of poor sharecroppers known as Daddy King. The name fit. Not only was he the fatherly head of a church, but he and Alberta had a family of three splendid children: a daughter, Willie Christine, born in 1927, and two sons, Martin Luther and Alfred Daniel. Martin Luther King, Jr., arrived in the world at noon on January 15, 1929, in a bedroom of his grandparents' house at 501 Auburn Avenue.

Daddy King was so overjoyed at the birth of his first son that he leaped into the air and

reached the ceiling. The family quickly took to calling the pudgy, healthy baby "M. L.," and a year and a half later, when a second boy was born, they nicknamed Alfred Daniel "A.D."

Daddy constantly prayed, "God grant my children will not have to come up the way I

the great pipe organ.

The King children spent all day Sunday at church, and they were there several afternoons during the week as well. By the time M.L. was five, he was performing gospel songs at church affairs. Accompanied on the piano by his mother, he never tired of singing

approach and started assaulting the living-room piano with a hammer, but M.L. and Christine convinced him to try the more subtle tactic of loosening the legs of the piano stool. Their sabotage went like clockwork; the music teacher arrived, sat on the stool, and crashed to the floor. Had anything, the children laughed, ever been so funny? Not in the least amused by the prank, their father gave each of them a thrashing.

It was not the first time M.L. had felt the sting of his father's switch. At home, Daddy meant to be obeyed absolutely. If something went wrong, somebody got a whipping. It was simple, quick, and persuasive, he explained.

"He was the most peculiar child whenever you whipped him," Daddy said of M.L. "He'd stand there, and the tears would run down and he'd never cry. His grandmother couldn't stand to see it." Grandmother Williams, who lived with the Kings, was closest to M.L., and after a spanking, Christine remembered, she always had for him "a hug, kiss, or kind word to help the hurt go away."

M.L. lovingly called her "Mama," and he could not bear the thought of living without her.

One day when he was roughhousing with A.D., his brother slid down the banister of the front stairway, missed his mark, and slammed into Mama, knocking her down. When she did not get up, M.L. was sure he and A.D. had killed her. Tears pouring from his eyes, he rushed into a bedroom and threw himself out a window, landing hard on the ground 12 feet below. When his family hurried to him, shouting that Mama was fine, just a little bruised, M.L. picked himself up and strolled away.

Not long afterward, on a Sunday, M.L. sneaked away to watch a parade—something Daddy had strictly forbidden. When the youngster returned home, the house was filled with sobbing relatives. His grandmother had suffered a heart attack and was dead.

Shattered, sensing terrible guilt for having gone to the parade, he once more ran to a second-story window and jumped out. Unhurt beyond some bumps and scrapes, M.L. did not walk away this time. He cried and pounded the ground, a captive of grief.

M.L.'s leaps from the upstairs windows naturally concerned his parents. What was he trying to do, they wondered kill himself? But that seemed unlikely. He never again tried to do himself harm, and in every other way he was a normal, contented youngster.

Like most boys, he did neighborhood jobs and delivered newspapers, once saving up \$13 of his own. Although always a little small for his age, he enjoyed sports and competed fiercely, especially on the football field, where, said a friend, "he ran over anybody who got in his way."

Sometimes, though, he left the playground,



Martin Luther King Jr. (bottom row, far right) at the age of 6, attending a birthday party with fellow first graders in his Atlanta neighborhood. "Love was central... lovely relationships were ever present," he later said of his childhood years.

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did." His prayers were answered; the family was well off. "Not really wealthy," his son Martin would recall, "but Negro wealthy. We never lived in a rented house and we never rode too long in a car on which payment was due, and I never had to leave school to work."

Quite naturally, life revolved around the Ebenezer church. Among M.L.'s earliest memories were the Sunday mornings when his father preached emotional, heartfelt sermons and his mother, the church's musical director, played lovely Christian hymns on

"I Want to Be More and More Like Jesus."

At home, M.L. was no saint. Once he clobbered his brother, A.D., over the head with a telephone, knocking him out, and his sister, Christine, could not help but notice how he always seemed to be in the bathroom when it was his turn to do the dishes.

The three children could put aside their squabbling, though not always with a happy result. None of them cared for the piano lessons their mother insisted on, so they conspired against them. A.D. favored a direct

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