

HONORING DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

Introducing School Children to Dr. King's Friends

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WASHINGTON (NNPA) — Over the course of a 32-year teaching career, Jacqueline James noticed a glaring problem—Black history was slowly but surely being ignored in the schools where she worked.

When it was outright dropped from her required curricula, she got creative, using Black history calendar factoids for penmanship lessons.

“Now, Black history is watered down to them teaching about [Martin Luther King Jr.] in January, then they don't even do anything else,” says James, adding that teachers today are under so much pressure, they don't have time to truly teach. “Even now...I really think children need to know

called Friends of Martin Luther King, Jr.

The sepia-toned hardcovers feature key players in the Civil Rights Movement who supported and worked with Dr. King. They are written at a middle school level, and each book has accompanying lesson plans and enrichment activities for teachers.

James' lesson plans are also in line with the Department of Education's Common Core educational standards, which have been adopted by almost every state. And she's enriching her own life, too. Through her company, JAX Publications, James is able to avoid the steep percentage cuts of being carried in a bookstore, which typically takes 40 percent, or working with a publisher who might want to own the rights to her work.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JACQUELINE JAMES/JAX PUBLICATIONS
Jacqueline James of Atlanta introduces kids to Dr. King's friends through books

the [sheriff] hit him and knocked him down. And

40th anniversary of the Selma-to-Montgomery, Ala. march and Rev. Vivian was also in attendance. “And I went and introduced myself, saying, ‘You don't know me but I've known you for years. I'm glad to meet you now,’” she says. “We shook hands and talked, and I said, ‘Somebody needs to write a book about you....’ And he said, ‘Well, here's my number. Call me when you get back to Atlanta and we'll sit down and talk about it.’”

Since then, she's become acquainted with other civil rights luminaries such as Dorothy Cotton, Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, and many more (even becoming good friends with the latter's daughter, Ruby Shut-

ttlesworth Bester).

“You only hear about Martin Luther King in Birmingham, you don't know about what this man [Shuttlesworth] did eight-nine years before that. Just talking to him—” she says, expressing how excited she was to get to know him. “And then the next year he was saying, ‘You know I've got a brain tumor, right?’ And I said, ‘What do you mean, brain tumor?’”

And he goes, “Well that's from all those White people beating up on my head for all those years.” A few months after that conversation, Shuttlesworth began having strokes. And a few years after that, his wife called to ask James to rush-deliver his book in the series.

A few hours after reading the un-illustrated, unpublished manuscript, Shuttlesworth died at home. “They had a chance to read it together and that just meant so much to me,” James says. “He couldn't speak by then, but [his wife] said she could tell he was really pleased.”

James says that if she hadn't been the kind of voracious reader who has read the newspaper cover-to-cover since grade school, she might have never known about these key figures. In fact, when she first met Shuttlesworth at an awards ceremony, she had no knowledge of who he was or the contributions he had made until he gave his keynote address.

There was also the time a librarian friend had invited her to an author event featuring Richie Jean Sherrod Jackson, author of *The House on the Side of the Road: The Selma Civil Rights Movement*. Unbeknownst to James at the time, the home of Jackson and her husband, Dr. Sullivan Jackson, served as the safe house and headquarters for all civil rights activity in Selma, Ala.

President Lyndon B. Johnson was even known to call there looking for Dr. King and others. The more James learned as she taught, the more she realized how little Black history was being shared across generations.

For example, she recalls learning that Dr. King's “Letter from Birmingham Jail” had been written on smuggled scraps of paper over time, and that his friend Wyatt T. Walker not only reassembled it later, but had also smuggled in the camera that captured the iconic photos of his imprisonment.

Even in her own childhood, James, now 66, remembers not knowing much about the history taking place around her. “Our parents didn't talk about it,” she recalls. “I remember hearing Rosa Parks' name, and not riding the bus, but I was nine then. And I vaguely remember the dogs on those children in Birmingham. But everything else I found out because of my own nosy self.”

‘You only hear about Martin Luther King in Birmingham, you don't know about what this man [Shuttlesworth] did eight-nine years before’

who helped him. Because they think Martin Luther King did everything from free the slaves to help Lebron James. It's crazy.”

Now retired, she's on a quest to re-educate the nation's Black children. In 2009, she founded JAX Publications to write, self-publish, and market a children's historical non-fiction series of books,

But more importantly, the project allows the self-professed “historical-accuracy fanatic” to get up-close and personal with the figures she so admires. Take C. T. Vivian, the subject of the first book in the series, for example.

“When I was 17...I saw this man standing, talking to this White racist sheriff. He wouldn't stop talking, and

then he got right back up and kept talking. They picked him up and took him to jail,” she remembers. “Then I saw the same scene years later on [PBS documentary] Eyes on the Prize, and I said, ‘That's the same man from those years ago!’”

Forty years after that, James was a guest at an event to commemorate the

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Author, educator and activist

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