

# Honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

## Freedom

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kept coming down harder, and it was getting harder to get people to vote.”

When not facing off with armed Klan members, the Ladners and their freedom fighter colleagues also had to contend with the county voter registrars, who put up any barrier they could to keep African Americans from the ballot box.

They clashed with the registrars not only as activists but also as citizens trying to vote themselves.

Joyce tells me she tried to vote three times, but without success.

“I couldn’t pass the literacy test,” she said.

At the time, she was a senior at Tougaloo College in Mississippi, which Dorie had attended, too, before dropping out to join the freedom struggle full time. Both were well-read, but the literacy tests weren’t about comprehending words on the page.

“It’s not that they were difficult, it’s just that your skin color determined that you wouldn’t pass,” said Joyce.

“White people didn’t have to take them. The registrars failed just about every Black person who came before them. I knew I was much better educated and read than most White people in Mississippi, but the registrar was asking me thing likes how many grains of sand were in this jar.”

By the end of Freedom Summer in 1964, many of their closest friends in the struggle — Lawrence Guyot, John Lewis, Fannie Lou Hamer, and others — had shed a great deal of blood in the long, often ugly campaign to have Congress finally pass the Voting Rights Act in 1965.

The legislation put an end to the literacy tests, grandfather clauses, and many other acts of intimidation used to prevent Black people from voting.

**‘I knew there was something about it that would not last’**  
But racial discrimination didn’t end. Dorie knew that it wouldn’t, as she told me in a phone conversation back in February 2013. During that talk, she recalled hearing President Lyndon B. Johnson employ the civil rights slogan “We shall overcome,” to urge passage of the Voting Rights Act.  
“I was cynical,” she said. “I accepted it, but

deep down in my heart, I knew there was something about it that would not last.”

Dorie’s worry was not misplaced. A few months later, on June 25, 2013, the Supreme Court delivered a crushing blow.

In *Shelby v. Holder*, the court limited enforcement of Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act, the protective clause that screened election laws for racial discrimination in formerly Jim Crow states. The justices noted that the Act was not meant to last forever, and that the country had made considerable progress in eradicating racism, particularly on the issues of the enfranchisement of black voters and the election of Black officials.

“It’s disappointing,” Dorie said in a phone interview shortly after the Shelby ruling. “But we have to mobilize. Congress is not going to do a damn thing (to change

“It’s not that they were difficult, it’s just that your skin color determined that you wouldn’t pass

this), but the people will do something.”

While people of color are no longer subjected to the voting suppression devices outlawed by the Voting Rights Act, they have, over the decades, been subjected to more surreptitious maneuvers that some believe have been used to limit voting.

New restrictive voting laws are slated to kick in over the next few years in 22 states that had no such things during the 2010 elections. Unless blocked by court challenges, burdensome voter identification laws requiring photo ID will take hold in North Carolina, where Section 5 might well have otherwise blocked them. A similarly restrictive voter ID law was reinstated last year in Texas, despite it being blocked by a Section 5 ruling just two years ago.

It’s not just the photo ID requirements that many consider problematic.

States have also passed laws to cut early voting, which Black and Latino voters rely heavily upon, and to make voter registration more difficult.

Most of these restrictions were passed in states that saw increases in minority turnout during the 2008 and 2012 elections.

Civil rights groups are

fighting the new restrictive voter laws in court in seven states: Arizona, Arkansas, Kansas, North Carolina, Ohio, Texas, and Wisconsin.

It promises to be a long, back-and-forth fight.

In recent years, more states have passed voter ID laws, impacting hundreds of thousands of voters, most of them Black and Latino.

### ‘I will never give up this fight’

The Ladner sisters are well aware of all of these developments.

In 1964, the sisters pushed for whites to come help with the Freedom Summer voting-rights project, in part because they figured white activists would come with some access to power.

“Our view was that if the sons and daughters of the rich and powerful came and saw what was happening in Mississippi, they were able to

call their congressmen and demand changes,” said Joyce. “I never had a congressman I could call.”

Pressuring Congress has proven less effective these days, she says. “Congress has been bought out. They only respond to whichever person or company is giving them the biggest campaign contribution.”

The skepticism she holds was underscored by two recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions, *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* and *McCutcheon v. Federal Election Commission*, both of which enhanced the power of political money to influence elections.

“I’m very concerned about voter suppression today and that Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act has been eradicated,” Dorie said in her talk with the Georgetown students.

It’s in such moments that Dorie likes to recall the musical group The Impressions, and the spirit at the heart of their song, “Keep on Pushing.”

“I will never give up this fight, and I’ll do it until I die,” she said at Georgetown.

“But it’s kind of hard to have to keep doing this over and over and over again.”

## Brother-in-law of Martin Luther King Jr. Dies at 83

ATLANTA (AP) — The brother-in-law of Martin Luther King Jr. and a founding member of The Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change has died.

Isaac Newton Farris Sr., who suffered from prostate cancer and Parkinson’s disease, died at his Atlanta home Dec. 30, his daughter Angela Farris-Watkins told The Associated Press. He was 83.

Farris married Christine King in a ceremony performed by Martin Luther King Jr. and their brother A.D. King on Aug. 19, 1960.

“He wasn’t caught up marrying into a prominent family,” Farris-Watkins said by phone. “He was secure in his own right.”

Farris was a successful entrepreneur and founder of Farris Color Visions. He also served a project manager for the construction of The King Center.

“Through all the tragedies and victories he helped build the King Center,” Farris-Watkins said.



Isaac Newton Farris Sr., brother-in-law of slain civil rights leader, Martin Luther King, Jr.

The center was founded by Martin Luther King’s wife, Coretta Scott King.

Farris was also a deacon and trustee at the historic Ebenezer Baptist church where he was a member for over 60 years.

“He was such an integral part of our family who will be sorely missed,” Farris-Watkins said.

In addition to his daughter, Farris is survived by his wife, Christine, his son Isaac Farris Jr., his granddaughter, Farris Watkins, his sister Gail Farris Joyce and many nieces, nephews and cousins.

Funeral arrangements will be handled by Willie A. Watkins Funeral Home in Atlanta.

Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.

—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.



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