

Honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

King’s Lasting Impact on Equity in Education

By *Stacy M. Brown*
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Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s influence on the Civil Rights Movement is indisputable, but his fight for equity in education remains a mystery to some. That fight began with his own education. “He clearly had an advanced, refined educational foundation from Booker T. Washington

High School, Morehouse College, Crozer Theological Seminary, and Boston University,” said Reverend Jesse Jackson, Sr., the founder of the Rainbow PUSH Coalition. “His education in his speeches and sermons and writings were apparent and he wanted us all to have that type of education.” King completed high school at 15, college at 19, seminary school at 22 and earned a doctorate at

26. “Dr. King laid down the case for affordable education for all Americans, including Polish children—from the ghetto and the barrios, to the Appalachian mountains and the reservations—he was a proponent for education for all and he believed that strong minds break strong chains and once you learn your lesson well, the oppressor could not unlearn you.”

Rev. Al Sharpton, the founder and president of the National Action Network (NAN), said that NAN works with Education for a Better America to partner with school districts, universities, community colleges, churches, and community organizations around the country to conduct educational programming for students and parents. “The mission of the or-

ganization has been to build bridges between policymakers and the classrooms by supporting innovations in education and creating a dialogue between policymakers, community leaders, educators, parents, and students,” Sharpton said. “We’re promoting student health, financial literacy, and college readiness in our communities, just like Dr. King did.” “When you look at his values, he always saw education, especially in the Black community, as a tool to uplift and inspire to action,” Sharpton said. “It’s definitely no coincidence that a number of prominent civil rights groups that emerged during Dr. King’s time, were based on college campuses.” Sharpton added that

King routinely pushed for equality to access to education. “Just as importantly, he always made a point to refer education back to character — that we shouldn’t sacrifice efficiency and speed for morals,” Sharpton said. “A great student not only has the reason and education, but a moral compass to do what’s right with his or her gifts. It’s not just important to be smart, you have to know what’s right and what’s wrong.” Dr. Wornie Reed, the director of Race and Social Policy Research Center at Virginia Tech who marched with King, said when he thinks of King and education, he immediately considers the late civil rights leader’s advocating that “we should be the best that we could be.”

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and hard work.*

*Along the way,
friendships took root,
memories were created,
and the seeds of possibility
were planted.*

*It’s all been leading to
this accomplishment...*

Astronaut

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orated NASA astronauts, dignitaries, relatives, and friends, who had flown and driven miles across the country to honor Lawrence at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. Lawrence’s older sister, Dr. Barbara Lawrence, attended and spoke; another prominent Chicago resident who was present was E. Dawn Griffin, the oldest daughter of Ernest Griffin, founder of Griffin Funeral Home in Bronzeville. The Griffin Funeral Home, which closed in 2012, handled the funeral arrangements for Lawrence. Members from Lawrence’s college fraternity, Omega Psi Phi, also attended to honor one of their own. On the sprawling grounds of the NASA facility, they participated in a two-and-a-half-hour ceremony that began at the Center for Space Education and culminated with an emotional wreath-laying ceremony at the base of the national Space Mirror Memorial, a massive black granite structure where Lawrence’s name is among those of 20 astronauts who either died in flight or in training. The ceremony brought out some of NASA’s astronauts and biggest officials. Charles Bolden, America’s first Black NASA chief administrator, and Stephanie Wilson, the second Black female astronaut, attended the service. Another Black astronaut, Win-

ston Scott, played the trumpet in a band that performed various jazz songs, including, “Fly Me to the Moon.” Reportedly, jazz was one of Lawrence’s favorite musical genres. Dr. Herman B. White Jr., a physicist and lecturer at Bradley University in Peoria, Ill., Lawrence’s alma mater, gave a presentation where a memorial scholarship and a conference room bear Lawrence’s name. Recently, Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio renamed a dormitory in Lawrence’s honor. Bolden, who piloted the space shuttles Columbia and Discovery, praised Lawrence for his spirit. “He took that first step,” Bolden said. “If he had lived, he would have been flying on that space shuttle also.” Col. Robert Cabana, who flew on four shuttle missions, agreed. “Major Robert H. Lawrence truly was a hero,” said Cabana. “He set the stage for what was to come.” Dr. Barbara Lawrence shared her experiences with her brother as they grew up on the South Side of Chicago. She said, when Robert was young, he was a very disciplined student and dedicated to learning. “I’m truly proud to have been his sister,” she shared. “He wasn’t interested in being the first Black astronaut. He was only interested in being given the opportunity to do what he wanted to do. I’m sorry he wasn’t here a little longer, but I think his job was one that was well done.”

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