PROFILE: Adventist member reflects on 1963 March on Washington

On Saturday, August 24, organizers of the National Action Network will hold a rally commemorating the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington. Human rights activists Martin Luther King III along with Rev. Al Sharpton will lead the rally that will begin at the Lincoln Memorial and end at the Martin Luther King Jr. monument in Washington, DC. As the nation marks the anniversary of this iconic rally, one attendee pauses to consider how the events surrounding that day, helped to improve race relations and economic equality.

Dupont Park Seventh-day Adventist church member, Anna Buchanan was 27 years old when she and her husband joined more than 200,000 people gathered on the National Mall to demonstrate for jobs and freedom on August 28, 1963. As the march date drew closer, anticipation and concern hung in the air surrounding DC.

"People just had normal sense of unease," recalls Anna. “Some people were concerned that there would be retaliation. However, once the buses dropped us off and we reached downtown, we came face-to-face with many different races. That day we were just one group of people that melded together for one purpose,” she said.

Organizers of the National Action Network hope to encourage the crowds to continue where Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech ended and to take the “National Action to Realize the Dream” motto as a repeated theme that will extend past Saturday’s march.

Orlan Johnson, public affairs and religious liberty director of the North American Division, agrees that lasting change will have to take place within the hearts of individuals. “The Adventist church, in particular the North American Division, was impacted by the March [in 1963]. It not only changed America, but it also changed the world as we knew it…nothing would ever remain the same. When you look at the diversity in our churches, from the members to the pastors to the leadership in the administration of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, at every level, the impact of that March is
evident in every corner of the Advent movement.”

**Changing the Way People Did Business**

Anna directly experienced racism in the late 50’s when she and her husband attempted to purchase a home near the United States Census Bureau in Suitland, Md. The real estate company told them that the home they wanted was unavailable but that a model home could be attained instead.

That information didn’t ring true with her husband.

“I guess the Holy Spirit put into his head that he should check into their claims,” said Buchanan. Her husband, Herbert, went to the activists at the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), where he volunteered in the 50’s and 60’s. She recalls seeing John Lewis, Jesse Jackson and other leaders around the city at various events.

They agreed to look into the real estate company’s claim and sent a “test couple” to determine if discriminatory practices were taking place. The Caucasian couple went to the same neighborhood to inquire about purchasing the same home that the Buchanan’s originally wanted and sure enough, it was for sale. No mention was made to them about the model.

Equipped with that evidence, CORE presented the facts to the real estate company and strongly encouraged them to sell the Buchanan’s the home they originally wanted. After the home was purchased, Anna later learned that the company had a designated street in the neighborhood for African-American families.

“It’s discouraging that some of the things that happened then are still going on today,” says Anna who still lives in Suitland, Md., today.

**Leaving the Balcony Behind**

Anna was born in Evanston, Ill., a small town 12 miles north of Chicago in 1935. Her father was a chef at Northwestern University and her mother worked both at a local church and in the home. She and her siblings were raised Baptist, and attended public schools where they saw very few African-American students. Although her high school hired Blacks, they were light-skinned janitors—not teachers. However, thanks to the efforts of the Civil Rights Movement, her niece is an administrator in that same school district in Illinois.

She cites other examples while growing up of racism in which African Americans could shop at the “Five and Dime” stores but could not sit down and eat. Their food orders were placed “to go.” And at movie theaters, Blacks were designated to the balcony.

Experiences like these propelled her to leave Evanston to attend a predominately black college. She wanted to be mentored by educated African-American professors; an experience that she wasn’t afforded in Illinois. Anna graduated from Howard University in Washington, DC, where she majored in French. She later worked at the Library of Congress and retired after more than 30 years.

Later in life, she and her husband continued to quietly educate people about their civil rights and fight against discrimination. Herbert handed out literature and constantly talked with people. “He always had his eyes open for issues,” remembers Anna, whose husband died in 1998. Both she and her husband tried to instill the importance and pride that comes from being an African American into their three children. “We would tell them to be careful where they went and what they said.” The children also accompanied them to voting stations; a right afforded through the Civil Rights Act of 1964. “People fought so hard to for us to have the right to vote. It would be criminal not to take advantage of the ability, when people died in order for us to do it,” she said adamantly.

**Looking to the Future**

At 77 years of age, Anna will not attend this year’s rally but hopes that the events marking the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington will continue to bring about change. “We have made some inroads but we are not at the point where we can say that racial inequality is over,” said Anna. She still hopes to see increased opportunities for minorities in the Church and in the world.
Although Johnson was not old enough to attend the “I Have a Dream” speech, he still feels linked to the event. “I was blessed to attend the Million Man March in Washington, DC, and felt a real connection to the original March on Washington by having a chance to talk with people that attended both marches.”

As Bible-believing Christians, we are told in Matthew 22 to express unconditional love towards others. Johnson believes that Adventists can aid in the efforts to end discrimination and racial segregation. “We must continue to do the work that God has for his people and that is to love all people from all walks of life of regardless of race, color, gender or creed? In the final judgment, the question will be did we do all we could to assist others who were less fortunate,” he said.

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