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Martin Luther King Jr. waves to the crowd on the Mall in Washington D.C. 50 years ago today shortly after his speech that riveted a nation. Courtesy photo

Echoes of King's dream evident in Southwest Kansas

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

Fifty years ago, the spoken word rang across a crowded national mall in Washington, D.C. The

dream described by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. blossomed in the hearts of those who heard it, and in the character of the nation. It grew. It was fruitful and it multiplied.

“I have a dream,” King said, “that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream ... that one day ... little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.”

Hundreds of miles away, in Southwest Kansas, change came at a gentler, slower pace than in the cities and the South and the universities where riots broke out. As a white boy growing up in the tiny town of Richfield, Duane Dunn heard reports of something going on in Washington, at Kent State, in Mississippi. However, he recalls, “I remember thinking, ‘Where’s that happening?’ It all seemed so distant, almost like a whole other country.”



Dunn was more concerned, he said, about the possibility of his older brother having to go fight in Vietnam. For him, race relations were simple.

“It wasn’t a big topic because I grew up in a family that said, ‘Treat everyone like you want to be treated.’ It wasn’t appropriate to treat other people poorly,” including the lone black farm family that lived in the area.

In school, Dunn heard about the “sundown laws” that warned people of color away from the town of Elkhart, where posted signs declared “N----r, Don’t Let The Sun Go Down On You In _____.”

“I remember talking about those laws, but didn’t ever see it posted,” he said. “Everyone knew it had been on the books but wasn’t enforced anymore, and shouldn’t be. Even when I got to Colby Community College and to K-State, and I became acquainted with new people and events in the outside world, there was this sense that things were happening, but we were still isolated.”

Today, as president of Seward County Community College, Dunn marvels at the way the world has come to Southwest Kansas.

“I see our students walking down the hall – kids from Australia, Brazil, Turpin. Our students interact in such a way that I’m really proud. I don’t see a lot of underlying tension.”

For Becky (Miller) Helm, a little girl growing up in Liberal, the events in Washington weren’t as important as the afternoons and evenings she spent in the nursing home kitchen with her mother’s good friend, Alice Sloan.

“My mom was a single parent — my dad died when I was 3, and when school was out, I had to go to work with my mom, who was a nurse at Good Samaritan Center. Miss Alice was the cook, and it was just a safe atmosphere where she would let me help her in the kitchen.”

Though the Millers were white, and Sloan was black, “Miss Alice said I was her child, and I honestly thought I was,” Helm said. “Sometimes, we’d go to church with her on Sundays. I loved it.”

Helm is still moved by the warmth and security she felt with Sloan and her fellow church members.

“I think of the people in the church and what we saw there. It was awesome. I just took it for granted as a child, but when I look back, I think that it took courage for both Miss Alice and my mother to be friends, and for people to welcome us. Back then, it just seemed normal to me. At my house, we didn’t look at color, we looked at people.”

As she grew older and attended high school, Helm’s sense of community cohesiveness held fast.

“People were more reserved back then,” she said. “But in my memory, it seems that everyone was accepted.” Helm remembers the first time black students made the cheerleading squad.

“Patricia and Kiddie Bond were cheerleaders, and there was some shock in the community,” Helm said, “but the overall feeling among the students was, if they could do the job, let them do it. Of course, I was not the most popular girl in school. I was somewhat of a nerd, and I didn’t run around with the cheerleaders. So it’s possible that I didn’t see issues that were there.”

Will Ponder wasn’t even born when King challenged the nation to open the doors to cross-cultural friendship. He graduated Liberal High School 40 years after the historic speech. Yet he views it as “just mind-blowing. During a time when there was complete separation and turmoil going on, to have that many people gathered together in one place ... it gives me chills.”

Ponder said the speech is the ultimate example of the truism “you’ve gotta know where you’ve been to know where you’re going.” King’s ideals, worked out by generations of Civil Rights advocates, “paved the way for me,” Ponder said.

Growing up in Liberal, Ponder said, “there wasn’t a whole lot of discrimination and racism. Everybody pretty much got along.”

Even so, at LHS, he recalls a certain amount of self-segregation.

“The athletes stayed together, the tables at lunch kind of grouped together by race,” he said. No one expressed hostile feelings, but no one offered a friendly welcome, either.

In his work as a JAG (Jobs for America’s Graduates) instructor at LHS, Ponder says he sees a different dynamic a decade later.

“I think that it has changed,” he said. “We have come a little further. It is more mixed, the athletes sitting with the other people, the tables mixing it up. It’s really not about race. We are seeing the integration, people just really coming together.”

Yet Ponder recognizes that King’s vision is not yet complete.

“I have to recognize that we came a long way, but there’s still a responsibility there to keep on, to keep going,” he said.

As Helm grew up, she discovered the world was not as accepting of the differences that seemed so minor back home.

“I moved from Liberal to Illinois at the end of my junior year, to a town where there were no

ethnic groups at all, zero,” she said. “They still had sundown signs up at the city limits. It was amazing to me: I asked, ‘What are those for?’ Here it was 1971, 72, yet I never knew that went on in the world.”

Helm attended college in Indiana and found yet more unexpected racial conflict.

“I worked for a company in Indianapolis, Stark-Wetzel, and one day a driver had forgotten to take an order down to another part of town, so I offered to take it,” she said. “I was just excited to discover the city. I parked, went in — and I was met at the door by the owner, a black gentleman, and he told me to never come back again. It wasn’t safe.”

When Helm told her big brother about the incident, he said, “They don’t want you there, you don’t want to be there.”

“That was around the time Bobby Kennedy came down and spoke,” Helm said. “They’d had a few riots. There were still fresh wounds.”

Arkansas, where she later worked, was probably the biggest shocker, Helm said.

“There were no ethnic groups where I lived. I had a friend who’d recently moved from California, and her husband was Hispanic. She had a child, from a previous marriage, who was biracial, and they had a child, and the school system refused to teach them,” Helm said. “This was 27 years ago, and they were very open about it. Later, I found out that the Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan lived 10 miles away.”

When she looks back at such experiences, Helm said, her core feeling is, “Why can’t we just be people? Every culture, every ethnic group has its nerds, its famous people, its good and bad. The national news media fosters a lot of the distrust and ill feelings. They have to have controversy. We are prejudiced against things we don’t understand. Our society misses so much by not being open.”

Liberal, however, is moving in the right direction, Helm believes.

“It’s not as bad as people think. It’s a combination of people who come here for a while, and some who stay. If we could all just meld a little more, it would be nice.”

At Seward County Community College, Dunn sees that very thing happening on a daily basis. With a robust international program and a commitment to diversity and excellence, SCCC sees a surprising array of cultures, languages and races, for a campus that perches on the remote High Plains of Kansas.

“We have a sense of pride about that,” Dunn said. “Each year, we have an international education week. We talk about cultural differences.” At SCCC, every student has “this great opportunity to get acquainted on a personal level with someone different than you are. At a university, you might know you’re on campus with thousands of people from all over the world, but you won’t necessarily interact with them.” Yet in Liberal, a student from one of the boroughs of New York City can get to know a farm kid from Forgan, Okla., study science with a classmate from Italy or California or Brazil.

“Our challenge, administratively, is how to attract faculty and administrative staff that reflects our study body,” Dunn said. “We have a bit of a challenge in our hiring to diversify our faculty. It’s not because we don’t try. In my generation, we’re more aware of the diversity challenge. Federal grants require that as a focus.”

At Liberal High School, Ponder sees the same issue from a different side. As an instructor who, like many of his students, is a minority, he hopes his presence will inspire and motivate.

“I’m not saying that it should be a specific goal to have a certain number of black teachers, but if I was a black kid sitting in class, and I wasn’t motivated to make things better in my life, and I looked around and didn’t see even one person like me ...” His voice trails off like a dropout student who stops showing up for class.

By contrast, Ponder said, “Me, standing here, right now, that means something to them. Their dreams aren’t far-fetched.”

As Ponder’s students make their way through high school, and, he hopes, college, the pool of role models will grow. As a result, Dunn said, it’s possible the problem of faculty diversity will resolve itself.

“I hope it’s a non-issue in a few years,” he said.

In the meantime, as best as he can tell, “Race in faculty and in the student body is just not a big deal to our students. I may be a little naive about that.”

Perhaps it’s a sense of wonder that fuels Dunn’s optimism.

“I didn’t grow up in a diverse environment,” he said. “I love sitting in the college cafeteria at noon. It’s like a mini United Nations. All those people, sitting around, laughing and joking, together.”

Ponder relishes a similar picture when he sits down at the high school cafeteria.

“It’s like I tell my students,” he said. “Change does not happen overnight, but progress should. We’re on our way.”

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