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## Winnetka recalls King's speech here

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By JOANNA BRODER Staff Writer

Approximately 150 people came together at the Winnetka Woman's Club on Monday night to celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. Day in a very special way -- by remembering the day that King spoke directly to them in their own backyard.

On July 25, 1965, King -- then a Noble Laureate -- delivered a speech on the Winnetka Village Green during a busy Chicago tour. Several women in Winnetka -- who had started the North Shore Summer Project -- were responsible for recruiting King. One of these women, Mary Powers, was part of Monday's panel. Another, Jean Cleland, wrote a letter that her son Carter read during the event.

"It is a proud chapter in Winnetka's history," said Katie Seigenthaler, Board President of the Interfaith Housing Center of the Northern Suburbs, "And it all happened thanks to you and to many others who worked in the support of justice."

Powers and Cleland were part of the North Shore Summer Project, a grass-roots organization which advocated for full housing rights for African-Americans, Asians and Jews in an age before fair housing laws.

Monday's panelists -- including "Chicago Tonight" correspondent Rich Samuels and David James, a former member of the North Shore Summer Project and the first African American man to move to Winnetka -- shared memories and reflections of the times.

"I felt a sense of peace and justice and calm and pride...every good emotion that a person could have I felt and my wife felt the same way about that meeting," said Marvin Miller, also on Monday's panel and a member of the North Shore Summer Project at the time with his wife Rayna. "I thought it was one of the most beautiful evenings I've ever spent."

Powers, a long-time resident of Winnetka who now lives in Wilmette, was President of the Winnetka Human Relations Committee at the time and was responsible for obtaining the permit for King to speak on the Village Green. She said she was "energized" and "mobilized" by King's speech and has gone on to become a long-time volunteer with Citizens' Alert, a police watchdog group.

In a letter that her son read aloud during the event, the North Shore Summer Project's Cleland wrote that after King's Winnetka speech, he commented that he liked a button that she wore in support of equal housing. Cleland removed the button and pinned it onto King's lapel. There is a picture of King wearing her button later on that evening. Cleland thanked the Village of Winnetka for "allowing a somewhat controversial (event) to take place on the Village Green."

At the time, the Park board had reservations about King coming to speak, but Powers and Dean Cameron, Winnetka Parks District Attorney at the time and also part of Monday's panel, were able to convince them. "This was a good thing," Cameron said. "...The right thing to be doing."

James, an attorney, recalled during the panel, the implications of the 1949 Supreme Court decision "Shelley vs. Kramer" which made the restrictive covenant unenforceable. After 1949, African-Americans started moving out of the traditional "black belt" where James grew up in Chicago, he said. Before that court case almost every lease in the city of Chicago had included a restrictive covenant that limited the use of the house to whites, he said. "So that if I wanted to buy a house, I had to be sure there was no racial restrictive covenant in there," he said. James said that the code word for keeping Jews out was "the area was restricted." The code word to keep African-Americans out was "it was under a covenant."

The "Black Belt" was about a mile and a half wide and five to six miles long, James said in a telephone interview Tuesday, and bounded by 22nd St. on the north, 67th St. on the south, Cottage Grove Ave. on the east and the Rock Island tracks on the west. Every race riot in the city during those times was about housing, he said during the panel. Some riots even required the governor to call in the national guard.

Realtors played a role in the discrimination, according to Miller. "The Realtors would steer people to areas that they thought people would be comfortable in." The tried to "ghettoize them even more," he added.

When the panel discussion turned to the 1965 march to support fair voting rights from Selma to Montgomery Alabama, Samuels said many North Shore residents joined the march. When Samuels asked if anyone in the audience had taken part in that march, Doris Conant, of Glenview, agreed to spontaneously share her memories.

"Looking back on it now it was a really risky thing to do," Conant said about going on the march with her then 12-year old son. "But he still regards it as the high point of his life and so do I."

"If I'm a little shaky it's because this was a very scary experience," she added later.

Conant said that she had assumed the protesters would receive protection from the national guard in the final days of the march. But after she and her son arrived at the capitol in Montgomery, they learned that the National guard would be withdrawn at 5 p.m.

The pair wandered away from their group to get something to eat and drink and find a bathroom. "We were turned away from every gas station and every store," she said, "and we finally wound up at a Holiday Inn which turned out to be the safest place in Montgomery."

Conant and her son ultimately made it to the Montgomery airport safely, however she later learned that other members of the protest had been shot and killed while riding in a cab.

The audience clapped heartily when Conant was finished.

"I think that when large groups of people get together with a single goal in mind it's helpful to everybody," panelist Miller said, "because it supports the idea that there are lots of us who feel that way."