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Winnetka activists to honor King's '65 visit
Woman's Club will hold discussion

By Dan Gibbard
Tribune staff reporter

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It was not exactly the March on Washington, but in the summer of 1965, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. traveled to Winnetka, where he addressed 10,000 people on the Village Green to denounce housing segregation.

Some things have changed since then and some haven't, but the meeting still resonates with fair-housing advocates on the North Shore. On Monday, the holiday dedicated to the slain civil rights leader, they will commemorate his visit with a panel discussion at the Winnetka Woman's Club about the event's history and where his cause stands.

"It's something not many people know about," said Elizabeth Landes of Winnetka, who is on the boards of the two sponsoring groups, the Winnetka Historical Society and the Interfaith Housing Center of the Northern Suburbs. "It was a very historic event in Winnetka, [but] it's something people are still surprised to hear happened."

King's visit came thanks to a desegregation group called the North Shore Summer Project, mostly women from Wilmette and Winnetka who took their inspiration from the Mississippi Summer Project, a voting rights effort in the Deep South.

The North Shore was "a closed community," said Marvin Miller, a member of the Summer Project who helped found the Interfaith Center, its successor, in the early 1970s.

Though the U.S. Supreme Court in 1948 outlawed restrictive covenants, which allowed sellers to specify that property could be sold to whites only, segregation against Jews, blacks and Asians was still widely practiced on the North Shore in the mid-1960s, Miller said. It was largely done by real estate agents who "steered" buyers into certain areas or towns, he said.

According to a Tribune account from July 26, 1965, a group of neo-Nazis attempted, unsuccessfully, to disrupt the rally. Unperturbed, King told the predominantly white crowd that "we must live together as brothers or perish together as fools."

Segregation "is morally wrong and sinful," King was quoted as telling the crowd, and he warned against "the silence of good people."

"It was just a beautiful speech, and we were all moved by it," Miller said. "I saw people crying in the audience."

More than 40 years later, some involved in Monday's event acknowledge frustration that the North Shore is still overwhelmingly white--95 percent or more in some towns, including Winnetka, which along with Glencoe saw its black population drop by half between 1980 and 2000, census data show.

The reasons for that are complicated, and include a broader economic disparity between blacks and whites, said Gail Schechter, the Interfaith Center's executive director. But the group hopes to raise awareness of housing issues, including affordable housing, a topic of fierce debate in the area.

"We want to remind people the reasons the North Shore Summer Project formed, the reason Dr. King came and the reason the [anti-segregation] Chicago Freedom Movement began--all those reasons are not resolved," Schechter said. "We still have a lot of discrimination."

Nevertheless, many an activist was either born or galvanized on that summer day 41 years ago, said another original organizer, Mary Powers.

Volunteers began working more closely with inner-city groups on projects such as the Contract Buyers League, which worked to renegotiate unfair housing contracts on Chicago's South and West Sides, said Powers, a Winnetka resident who became involved in a police accountability project. "A lot of people were inspired and encouraged by this vision Dr. King talked about," Powers said.

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If you go

- When: Monday. Refreshments will be served at 5:30 p.m.; the discussion begins at 6
- Where: The Winnetka Woman's Club, 485 Maple St.
- Tickets: \$20; \$10 for seniors, students and Historical Society members
- Contact: 847-446-0001 or e-mail winnetka411@comcast.net.

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