

DAILY NEWS

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His cause

HIS SPIRIT MOVED THEM

By Michael O. Allen
Daily News Staff Writer

Children were raising innocent voices in freedom songs in church basements as adults braved firebombs, water hoses, dogs and jails for full rights as American citizens.

As a 5-year-old, Suzan Johnson joined the other children singing at Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. Now 41, the Rev. Suzan Johnson Cook is pastor of the Bronx Christian Fellowship Baptist Church and a member of President Clinton's race-relations panel.

"Those were the wonder years for us," say Johnson Cook, whose mother taught public school in Harlem for 22 years and whose father was one of the city's first black trolley car drivers. "I remember the energy of our community, as if we were all moving as one wave, not waves clashing against each other. We had a common purpose, a common cause, and we worked toward making it happen. And there hasn't been in my lifetime another movement like that. It was a spiritual movement."

Virginia Fields was 17 in 1963 when a bomb exploded in Bethel Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, while she was worshiping there. She was primed for activism when the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. came through town months later for his first march on Birmingham.

Fields, 52, now Manhattan borough president, was swept up in the mass arrest that ended the march and spent five days in the Birmingham City Jail, where King wrote his now-famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

"We all believed so much in his leadership," she said. "We felt that he was going in the right direction, and after so many earlier attempt to desegregate the schools and the lunch counters had failed. With his leadership and his mass action, we just felt a renewed sense of excitement, of energy."

African-Americans had endured the horrors of some 300 years of slavery to arrive at the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 free, but with few rights of citizenship. But by the end of World War II, black patriots returned from their service with the sense of a rightful place at the table as members of the American family.

In the years that followed, a migration of blacks from the rural South to the cities gave birth to a sizable black middle class—and the civil rights movement.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, established in 1909, attracted funding from new members made up largely of educated blacks in the North. Many of these included young lawyers who, through the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, methodically waged court challenges that clarified and expanded the rights of African-Americans.

In one such case, the 1954 Supreme Court allowed Linda Brown to attend Summer Elementary School, an all-white school near her home in Topeka, Kan., paving the way for desegregated schools and many of the civil rights gains to come.

Resistance in the South to the Brown vs. Board of Education ruling would propel the fledgling civil rights movement in its struggle to bring down many of the barriers to black participation in American life.

The battle gave the nation generations of African-American leaders, including King, who as the head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference would go on to captivate America and the world.

Percy Sutton, who in 1966 had been elected Manhattan borough president, marched with King a week before he was killed.

“He was a quiet and effective revolutionary in bringing about changes in the human condition here in America,” Sutton said.

Julian Bond and the group he co-founded, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, joined other young people from the SCLC, the Congress of Racial Equality and the NAACP to stage sit-ins, boycotts, marches and freedom rides to test the enforcement of desegregation. Weeks ago, Bond was elected chairman of the NAACP.

Bond said he is old enough to know that things are better now, but he also admits, “There are some indices of black life in America that are abysmal.”

Sutton said the battle to solve current problems of black life would have to be waged without a towering figure like King.

“Dr. King was the last of the singular civil rights leaders.” Sutton said. “The day of the singular leader is gone.”

“Now in every city, or every town there is a man or a woman who stands up for the rights of minorities who is that leader in that town in that factory, in that bus line, in that community. They are all leaders,” Sutton said.

Johnson Cook carries on the struggle in her work in the church, in her community and especially on the President’s race-relations panel.

“What I’ve seen in the two short years I’ve been here (in the Bronx) is a complete transformation of a people who are reclaiming our sense of community that we all learned as kids but lost,” she said.

Johnson Cook said the discussion on race has also changed from the time of the civil rights movement, when the issue was largely getting social justice for black Americans. Today, 33 years of immigration have changed the face of America.

“We are always wrestling with the issue of whether we should forget the black-white struggle and move on to the diversity question,” Johnson Cook said.

She said the chapter is not closed yet on that struggle because blacks are still fighting for justice in this society. At the same time, other minorities have their voices in the debate now, she said.

“The question we are asking is, ‘Can we be one America in the 21st century?’ And the strong implication in that question is that, in many ways, we are not,” Johnson Cook said.