

Interview of Reverend Samuel Billy Kyles. Interviewed by Crystal Windless of the Crossroads to Freedom Project, Rhodes College.

Rev. Kyles was and continues to be one of society's most active members in the push for Civil Rights. Reverend Kyles is the last living individual to have shared Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s last living hour with him. He was also an eyewitness of Dr. King's assassination. Reverend Kyles has traveled the country sharing his story of activism and giving a 'witness' to the legacy of Dr. King. In addition to his participation during the Civil Rights Movement, characterized by his participation in marches, integration of segregated businesses and schools, and much more, he has served as the pastor of Monumental Baptist Church for over four decades. Among his many accolades, Reverend Kyles has also served as a panelist at the White House Conference on Hate Crimes.

This interview was conducted in 2006 to be included in the Rhodes College Crossroads to Freedom Digital Archive Project.

The transcripts represent what was said in the interview to the best of our ability. It is possible that some words, particularly names, have been misspelled. We have made no attempt to correct mistakes in grammar.

*Interviewer:* Well, first of all, on behalf of Rhodes College and the Crossroads to Freedom Project, we really want to thank you for being here today and sharing with us your story. Could you state for us your full name?

*Rev. Kyles:* Samuel "Billy" Kyles.

*Interviewer:* And Reverend Kyles, where you were born and raised?

*Rev. Kyles:* I was born in Mississippi, but I was raised in Chicago. My family was a part of that migration – there was a huge migration of blacks leaving Mississippi going to Chicago. At one time, in the early 30s, late 30s, early 40s, there were more black people from Mississippi living in Chicago, than was left in Mississippi. My family was a part of that migration. I grew up in Chicago and came back to Memphis, came back south in 1959.

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I made a conscious decision that I wanted to be involved in the Civil Rights Movement. So there was a little newly organized church that was looking for a pastor and my pastor in Chicago had organized this church for the people in Memphis and he sent me down to preach for him. Well, I came to a meeting to preach for them and they elected me as pastor. So that's how I started my career in Memphis, in 1959.

*Interviewer:* And growing up, where did you attend school? Were you in school in Chicago?

*Rev. Kyles:* Yeah, Chicago, Northern Baptist Seminary in Chicago, in **Roanoke**, Illinois.

*Interviewer:* So you obviously traveled to different places. Can you give us some of your role models whole growing up?

*Rev. Kyles:* While I was growing up? Oh! Mainly preachers. Really my dad was a minister, and it was always kind of understood that I was gonna be a preacher 'cause my mom said as a kid I preached all the time.

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As a matter of fact, that's how I got the name "Billy." Bill was not my given name. My mom was good at giving nicknames. There was a famous preacher in that day called Billy Sunday. My mom said as a kid, I would baptize cats, dogs, and preach at dead birds' funeral, and I was preaching all the time. She started calling me Billy, after Billy Sunday. So, when I went to elementary school the first time and they called "Samuel," I never answered 'cause I've never heard my name called as Samuel. So, when I got grown and all of that, I had my name legally changed to Samuel Billy, but if you go back to Chicago now, most people still know me as Billy Kyles.

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I had a singing career before I came to the ministry. But ministers were my role models. I thought C.L. Franklin was just Aretha's dad and he used me a lot as a young preacher to come and – he tried to get me to move to Detroit and be his first assistant pastor, but I didn't want to live in Detroit. There was Dr. **Gardner**. These were men who were like the pioneers in the black ministry, and so I just kind of knew that one day I'd be in that group. I didn't know it was gonna happen so fast. These were the senior pastors. They were great role models. And of course, my own dad.

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My dad died really young. He was 51. I was still a teenager. He had a severe – he had cancer of the lung. His sickness was just quite horrendous. It struck me in ways that I guess I still had to deal with. Because even now, as I am recovering, I'm in rehab for a triple bypass, never thought I'd have to do that. I didn't have a stroke. I didn't have a heart attack. But I wanted to do this interview because my heart really reaches out to young people. I

do a lot of schools and I do a lot of universities, high schools, and so I wanted to make time to do this.

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I had no medical records of my parents and that wasn't unusual in my day. I don't know if they had hypertension. I don't know if they had high – 'cause I know they weren't measuring cholesterol in those days. I didn't know if they had diabetes or anything. I only knew what they put on their death certificates. Of course, dad, I just loved they way he operated. He was Mr. Cool. I don't know if I've ever seen him blow up or holler out at something. He was always even keeled, and I hope a great deal of that rubbed off on me. Those were kind of role models I had mainly.

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I used to – as I kid I was working in Chicago downtown as a messenger. I would see these lawyers and these vicuna coats and the little hats, that Chicago style hats. For a few seconds, I thought I might wanted to be a lawyer, but that didn't last. That did not last. The ministry has been my life all my life. As I said earlier, I had a singing career. I was a boy soprano. At school, I would rehearse and sing with the girls 'cause I had this high soprano voice. So, by the time I got old enough to enjoy it, my voice changed. Then I had to rehearse with the boys. But I had a very high tenor voice and it was kind of in demand in Chicago.

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Many of the groups, James Cleveland, Mahalia Jackson, all those people were just close friends of mine. James Cleveland and I used to go from church to church on Sunday night, church hopping. Sam Cooke, we all live in the same neighborhood, the Staple Singers in Chicago. We used to sing under streetlights and I had records out. I was with a group called the Thompson Community Singers. They just broke up a couple of years ago, Milton Brunson and the Thompson Community Singers.

Then I was with a group called Maseo Wood Singers, The Maseo Wood Singers, and we traveled the country with Rev. Franklin and Aretha, and the Staple Singers -The original Harmonets out of Birmingham, Alex Bradford, all these people, the Caravans with

Albertina Walker. Then when I accepted my call to the ministry, I kind of backed off the singing career because I did not want to be known as a singing preacher. People really don't take singing preachers as serious as they should.

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One of the things that inspired to come to Memphis is I was not known as a singer and I had to make it – I wanted to make it as a preacher. That's a very long answer to your last question.

*Interviewer:* (Laughter) It's fine.

*Rev. Kyles:* It's all right to be known as a singer - a preacher who can sing, like Rev. Franklin, Aretha's dad was known as a preacher who can sing. He was not a singing preacher. While James Cleveland was known more as a singing preacher, and there are others. We remained friends for a very long while. I knew most of the people in Black America who were doing something in those days.

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When I came to Memphis, it was in 1959, I had a wife and three small children. I saw on that television what people were doing in the south, students were doing. I said, "Hey, I want to be in this." So I set my sails to come to Memphis.

When I came to Memphis, everything in Memphis was segregated. There was not one thing integrated. It was a totally segregated town. Everything. You couldn't – maybe one day a week you could go to the zoo if that didn't follow the holiday. The churches were segregated. The schools were segregated. Everything in Memphis. So when I announced in Chicago that I was moving to Memphis, my brothers – I have six brothers - at the time – said, "Wait a minute. Don't you know that Chicago is the Promised Land of black people? You are in the Promised Land. Why are going back to Egypt – Memphis?"

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My mother was the only one that said, "Go with God." So I came, my wife and three small children, to this segregated city in 1959. That really wasn't a very long time ago. And so I'll let you ask the next question.

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*Interviewer:* For you, how was that different, the atmosphere, from going from Chicago to Memphis? What was the effect that they had on you and your family personally?

*Rev. Kyles:* Well, we made a pact – well, the children were small, but my wife and I – that we would not cooperate with segregation. We would not go to places that were segregated. Church was the only place we'd go to and it wasn't – people – white people were welcome to come to our church. They just didn't come.

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We wouldn't shop in stores that didn't give us respect, didn't call her "Mrs." or me "Mr." or "Rev." We didn't come making fun of our country cousins and, "Why ya'll take this mess?" We didn't do that. I simply came and got involved with the NAACP. My family was involved in all the marches the children were in. My oldest daughter was one of the thirteen children who integrated the schools in Memphis. There were thirteen black kids. She was five years old and she was one of the thirteen integrated schools. We made that pact with ourselves.

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I love movies. I just love the movies. We would get in the car and drive to St. Louis and spend the day going to movies, and then come on back to Memphis, or spend the night in St. Louis. But we never gave in to segregation. If we going some place and they didn't treat me respectfully, I never went there again.

It took some getting used to, but we did get used to – before we'd get used to just this is how we live, we got involved in changing that whole structure, and I am so thankful that I had a part in helping to bring about that change, in not only Memphis, but in America, and even the world.

*Interviewer:* That's really commendable, your commitment for change. Although, despite your efforts to go around segregation, did you all experience any specific incidences of discrimination?

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*Rev. Kyles:* Only as it was marked that we couldn't go to the movies. We could go, but we would have to sit up in the balcony, in the **buzzard** rows, and we wouldn't do that. As a matter of fact, my wife, at the time, and I integrated the **Malco** Theater. We were the first known blacks to sit on the main floor.

I told the group – we had this group where we made all the plans for desegregating things, I said, “If we don’t desegregate the movies next, I am quitting the movement.” They said, “Oh, goodness, we better desegregate the movies; for Rev. Kyles won’t quit the movement.” And so we did put the movies on the list, but it only affected us in that we didn’t try on our own, my family and myself, to go into places where blacks were not welcome, until we did it in an organized fashion.

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*Interviewer:* You mentioned the NAACP. When you arrived in Memphis, did you notice any other specific individuals, or in general, who were also trying to push for equal rights?

*Rev. Kyles:* Yeah. There were some, but most of them worked with the NAACP or they had a democratic club or something. There was a fellow called O.Z. – what’s O.Z.’s name – well, you’re pulling off a 40-year memory here, but O.Z. Evers I think his name was. He had filed suits and had done a lot of things toward trying to integrate Memphis. I think he got arrested on the bus for sitting up front. There were people like that. Not a great number of individuals like that, but there were some who were, but most of the integration efforts came through the NAACP. They had a very strong NAACP chapter in Memphis.

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*Interviewer:* Besides what you saw yourself, are there any individuals who stuck out in your mind that inspired you to get involved with the Civil Rights Movement with equal rights?

*Rev. Kyles:* Oh, yeah. There were many. The ministers in Birmingham. Of course, Martin was not famous at those times, but he was very much involved. And Fred Shuttlesworth, thank God he’s still living. Fred was awfully inspiring. We were together not long ago at a funeral in Birmingham. And then the black politicians, I was very inspired. Adam Clayton Powell was just – he knew how to handle power.

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Later on, Charlie Diggs and Rangel, the black politicians. And finally, we began to get them as mayors in cities. You had Mayor

Hatcher in Gary, Indiana, the first African-American of a city that size to be mayor.

But you know, as you look – as I look back, and as I think about it, I think I was perhaps equally as much inspired by people, by the common ordinary, everyday people, who'd stepped out there. You know, it was the people of Montgomery, the common people, who stayed off the busses. It wasn't started with the middle class. It was the garbage workers in Memphis that stood up against the man in 1968 and said, "I am a man and I want to be treated like one."

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So I've been inspired of how God uses whom he pleases, whom he pleases, and whom he chooses. They're not always someone that you see on television as an individual. Well, all these people marching in Montgomery, that whole thing, thrust Martin Luther King Jr. into national prominence. But it was the everyday people who refused to get on those busses and say, "We will walk in dignity rather than ride in shame." That movement was – that Birmingham – the results of what we did in Birmingham to get the Voting Rights Bill and that sort of thing, but that boycott in Montgomery was –

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Then this everyday mom, everyday person, Rosa Parks, who never looked for any fame or fortune, but was thrust into national and international prominence based upon her desire to sit in that bus and not get up and move. That is so powerful. And to think it's been – it has not been 50 – it's almost 50 years, that that happened. She was with us up until last year. I look at how fast the time seems to be passing, it is passing. I know it's not passing any faster than a second at a time, but it just seems like it.

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But I'm struck by the people, the common ordinary, everyday people, who take a stand. I mean, if you could imagine what Memphis was like. The police were vicious in Memphis toward black people. They thought the only way you handle them is you beat them or you shoot them, and that was it. No respect. Just do what they want to do. Here these men, many of them uneducated, but much more than garbage men. They were deacons in our church. They were ushers in our church. They were in the choir. They were grandfathers. They were uncles. They were fathers.

They were more than just garbage men. They were treated less than men.

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That's why that sign is so powerful. It doesn't say "freedom." It doesn't say "justice." All it says is "I am a man." And to stand up against what they did, was just such an enormous thing that they did, but because of the death of Dr. King, we didn't see, and perhaps still don't, didn't see the significance and how – what a stand that was for them to take at the lowest economic rung on the ladder, the lowest educational rung on the ladder, and said, "We are not" – 1,300 of 'em said, "We are not going back to work." They refused to go back to work.

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That is a testimony to the desire, to the fact that the desire for dignity, it's seen in work. There is dignity in work, but if I'm gonna work, pay me a decent wage. One of them said to me, "Rev. Kyles, don't think that we don't appreciate what you all are doing for us and what you do." But he said, "I have not had a coat to fit me since I've been a grown man. Every coat I've worn has been a hand-me-down. Somebody gave it to me." He said, "I work hard. If they would pay me, I could by my own. I don't have shoes to fit. You get the size closest to you." He didn't say, "foot," your "feets." "You get the size closest to your feets, and that's what you wear." He said, "I haven't a pair of shoes to fit me. If they paid me for the work that I did."

Some of them made such little wages; they could qualify for welfare after working the whole month. They qualified for welfare.

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So when they took that step – nobody from New York, nobody from Chicago came to tell them, "You ought to go on strike." Their leadership came up from the bottom. It didn't come top-down. It was bottom-up leadership from the sanitation workers. And so when you look at Montgomery, and you look at Birmingham, my God, the children of Birmingham, filled up the jail. Those firehoses and those dogs, my Lord, those hoses were so



strong, they could lift a body and throw it into a tree or a building. They could take the bark off of a tree. These kids would get up and go right back. They filled up the jails, and Bull Connor, the police commissioner, put the firehoses. Then he brought the dogs out.

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There's a powerful picture in the Civil Rights Museum. It shows a young fellow, school age, standing with his hand like this, and the dog is right into his stomach. The dog is – the policeman's holding it, and he's – there's no fear in his face. There's a calmness about it like saying, "Go ahead. Shoot your best shot." He didn't try to grab the dog and choke it. He just stood there. These were young people who filled up the jails of Birmingham.

Then all across the south, those four young people who stood at – sat on that lunch counter and got all that started. They're trying to make a museum out of that place and use those stools in the museum. I've been contacted three or four times about working with them, and I told them I'd be glad to do it.

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Even as we think about the people who were thrust out into national and international prominence, it's the common everyday people. The school kids of Birmingham. They are the ones who stood up against those dogs. And Martin Luther King knew that we couldn't win the movement battle any other way other than non-violent. Couldn't do it. We could not win any other way, but non-violently. We didn't make guns. We didn't have sharp shooters.

If we had had sharp shooters on the roofs of buildings in Birmingham, Montgomery, and shooting white people at random, cutting open their bellies and taking out babies, if we were doing that, we would never have gotten the sympathy of the world.

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The world gave us its sympathy because we didn't fight back and love. Martin said love is the only way we'd win this. We've got to win it this way. There were many who disagreed. Everybody was not in favor of non-violence. But we would not have gotten the sympathy. When the world saw us stand up to firehoses and

dogs, and men on horses with billy sticks, bully sticks, and trampling women and children under the feet of the horse, my God, this can't – "We can't do this. We're civilized."

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Then right after that march on Washington, 250,000 people gathering peacefully, the president tried to get them to cancel it, peacefully gather, a month or two after that, those four beautiful children were bombed in Sunday school. They caught who did it, and they got away. Got some small time.

People are now taking a second look at the Civil Rights Movement as they should, because – and one of the reasons I am delighted to participate in this, the story really has to be told. It really has to be told. For young people, it's not – it may be two generations removed, and in some cases, not even two generations removed, and it's still with us. That's why I just – in the midst of everything else, I made time to sit here and chat with you today.

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*Interviewer:*

And thank you so much. You've shared with us several memories from the Civil Rights Movement in different places. Can you give us on or two more of your memorable events specific to Memphis?

*Rev. Kyles:*

Yeah. I was arrested in Memphis for sitting on the front of a bus in Memphis. It was planned. We were gonna have 500 preachers to sit on the bus on Monday morning and get arrested. We had a big rally downtown and everybody was making these speeches, and somebody said, "Monday morning, 500 black preachers are gonna get on a bus and get arrested," and the place just went wild.

Well, Monday morning came. There were not 500 preachers. There were not 100. There were not 5. There were 2 preachers and about 8 or 10 laymen. I was one of the preachers, and Rev. Jim Netters of Mt. Vernon Baptist Church was the other.

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We were the two that got arrested different places on the bus. When I got on the bus and sat down, the bus driver said, "You know you can't sit there. You know what the Jim Crow laws are." I said, "Well, I'm sitting here today." He said, "I'm calling the

police." I said, "Well, do what you have to do." So he called the police and he wouldn't move the bus. He parked. While waiting for the police to come, the black people on the back of the bus said to me, very respectfully, "Rev., why don't you come on back here where you belong so we can go to work?" I did not bear them any ill will.

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I went to the back of the bus to have a Civil Rights meeting, not to keep from getting arrested. When they said, "Come back here where you belong," I knew they had lost their dream, and I didn't want to do that. They had so many "can'ts" to deal with. You can't go here. You can't go there. You can't try on clothes in certain stores even you buy it. I mean all these – you can't go the zoo. You can't go to hotels. You can't go to restaurants. You can't go to golf courses. You can't. You can't. You can't.

So I didn't bear them any ill will. I went to back of the bus and I said, "Good people, good morning. Do you see a steering wheel back here?" They said, "No." "Do you see a clutch and brakes?" They said, "No." I said, "If there's not steering wheel and no clutch, and mechanisms to drive the bus in the back, how can we ever drive it if we can't sit up front? We can do more than clean these busses."

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I said, "Am I making sense?" I said, "You can't drive it from the back. We gotta be able to sit up front?" I said, "I'll go to jail. You go on to work." They said, "Rev., we'll wait." I said, "Okay." So they came and arrested me. But I'll tell you this, the general manager and president of the bus company that arrested me, is Will Hudson, who is the chairman of my trustee's board. Yes.

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Another memorable occasion – I tell young people this as I travel around the country, that I went to school with my 5-year-old daughter, not in Zimbabwe, not in South Africa, not in Bosnia, in Memphis, Tennessee. In my lifetime, I went to school with police protection for my daughter, not going to bomb the school, not going to set it afire, not going to harm a teacher. Five years old going to get an education, police came to my home - this very house and escorted us to school.

The school was completely surrounded with police. We got there. I got out of the car. The policeman who escorted me, plain clothed, introduced me to the policeman who was in charge, a little short red-headed guy, never will forget it. I got out of the car. He said, "This is Rev. Kyles. He's bringing his daughter to go to school." Bruce Elementary School. I said, "Good morning. How are you?" And he looked at my hand as if I had leprosy. He never touched my hand.

All the police surrounded the school to keep away the howling mob. There were no mobs of individuals. The police were the mob.

As my daughter and I walked down the sidewalk going into the school, they said the nastiest things to me and my – the police – me and my 5-year-old daughter, things that I couldn't repeat in any company. That was her first day of school. We went into the school. The teacher rubbed her skin, smelled her hair as if she was the 'thing.' Five years old. Memphis, Tennessee. In my lifetime.

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*Interviewer:* I'm so sorry. It's hard to even imagine. Now looking at Bruce Elementary and seeing all the African-American children that something like that would happen.

*Rev. Kyles:* Yes, yes. And it's not that long ago. My daughter is 50 years old. She's here all the time. The thing that happened beyond that was she – kids make friends. She spent the night with white kids and they would spend the night with her. She got to junior high, Bellevue, Bruce, Bellevue, Central. She got to Bellevue and kids she had made friends with, she had gone to school with, who happened to be white, they were all seated at a table for lunch.

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The black kids come over to the table where my daughter is and say to her, "What's wrong with you? You think you're better than us that you got sit with them?" And these were friends she had gone to school with all her life in junior high.

The thing that really did it for her was she got the lead female role in the senior play. Senior play, female, she got the lead role. The male lead was white. The kids had no problem with it. They were

making costumes. They were designing sets and doing all the things that young people do. But the **dream buster** teacher, who was white, said, "No, not on my watch. There will be nothing of the sort on my watch." So she canceled the play, and my daughter cried, and she cried, and she cried.

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She said, "Daddy, I'm sick of this mess. I want to go to a black college." I said, "You can do that, **Dwana**. You can go to a black college as long as you realize when you get out of that black college, the world will still be diverse and you will have to live in it." So she went to Spelman for two years and then transferred to **Howard**. She graduated from Howard in the **Fine Arts** program.

There were so many other incidents that happened, things she had – in junior high she had the answer to questions written on her thigh. I said, "Dwana, what happened, baby?" She said, "Oh, Daddy, the day I got in that women's class, she just ticked me off. She said something about, 'like that communist Rev. Kyles,' and I just tuned her out. I was just trying to pass the course."

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There are incidents all through where you would not think professional teachers – she knew who I was and she knew Dwana was my daughter. So some illustration she was giving and she said, "Like that communist Rev. Kyles," and all the eyes went to Dwana. We lived through all that.

Many years later I did feel quite guilty in taking this 5-year-old child – I couldn't do it now. I know I couldn't do it now. Taking this 5-year-old child through a police line. We had police coverage probably a week and then I just cut it off. I said, "No thanks." Then I would drive her to school myself. Then finally we all got together and carpooled.

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Every major thing that happened in Memphis regarding integration, my family and I were involved at some way or other. I got a call at my office one day, said, "Rev. Kyles, your son just led a walkout at Central and they don't have a permit." They were gonna walk to the Board of Education. He says, "Yeah." I said, "Yeah, they can handle it."

I had to go up – the principal sent for me one – said, “You come here and talk about **Dwayne**.” Dwayne is my older son. Dwayne refused the draft. He said, “I’m not gonna go and shoot at someone. I don’t have any use for military training. I don’t bother people who want it. That’s fine. I don’t have any use for it. Give me” – and that time, it was mandatory in Tennessee that you had to have ROTC. He didn’t want to take ROTC. He said, “Give me a study hall or something.”

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He was the rebel at the school. The principal said, “We need a parent-teacher conference.” So I went up there. **I didn’t** say anything but “Good morning, Mr.” – whatever his name, and I let Dwayne talk for himself. This man could not stand that. I didn’t – we had a thing in our family that you could talk about any subject to anyone as long as you were respectful, but you could never be disrespectful. Mr. **Simonington**, that was his name. So he said, “Rev. Kyles, I hate to see Dwayne like this because he could be a great leader of his people.” Dwayne said, “Sir, if I may correct you, I can be a leader of all people.” And this man, he just could not – so Dwayne refused. So I don’t think he ever got a high school diploma.

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We went to court. We won on the case, but I don’t think he ever went and picked up his diploma. He’s a lawyer now in Chicago. Even as I talk about it, the time seems so short. It wasn’t that long ago. Here the 5-year-old that I was taking to school is now 50 years old, which certainly makes me 70-something years old. I guess I better get that story told while I have some clarity **of mind**.

**Video Cut (.flv)**

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*Interviewer:*

Rev. Kyles, you mentioned early that everyday people, many times when we’re talking to people who had experiences doing the Civil Rights Movement, they say, “I wasn’t doing anything special. I was just doing what I had to do.”

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With you being involved in so much; do you feel as though you were directly a part of the Civil Rights Movement?

*Rev. Kyles:* Oh, yes. Yes. My youngest son asked me one day, he said, "Dad" – he was reading about something in a book and I was in the book. He said, "Dad, what was it that was in you guys that made you do what you did?" He said, "That was awesome." I said, "Well, it needed to be done and somebody had to do it." I said, "But I'll tell you what, I'm glad you asked me that way rather than, "Dad, where were you during all those years?" And some people say I didn't get it. Many times, parents did want the children involved because, "I didn't send you that school to be getting in no trouble. I want you to" – 'cause they knew that education was the way out.

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They didn't mean any harm, so they had to be educated. The children not only were being educated at the schools, and many of them had to sneak to be in the movement, and that was because of the parental protection that they felt they had to give the children so they could escape. If we squeaked and scrapped, and got you into Spelman, don't go around their raising no standoff to University of Ohio or anywhere. Go to school. There was never my kids were raised in the movement, as were many other Memphis families. My children were raised in the movement.

I told him, I said, "Devin, I sure am glad you're asking me that as opposed to, 'Where were you during that period?'" "Well, I was working hard trying to make a way for you." "Yeah, okay."

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*Interviewer:* Well, we're glad that you were there during the movement. Do you feel as though you were changed at all from your experiences?

*Rev. Kyles:* No. I was doing what I knew I had to do and what I came to do. I made a conscious decision to leave Chicago. I could have had a career in singing. I have commercial records out, gospel records. Everybody was so surprised. My church didn't know I was a singer and all that. They were surprised to know that I sang at the Apollo. I said, "And I wasn't standing outside singing at the Apollo. I sang in the Apollo." I knew I was doing, and I still feel, I'm doing this because I need to do it.

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My schedule may not be as full as it's been in years past, because of my surgery, triple bypass. But thank God I didn't have a stroke or a heart attack. I know that I must tell that story. I'm gonna say it as often as I can. I must expose it to as many people as I can.

That's what's good about the project you're doing. I'm not telling you something that somebody told me. I'm telling you something that I've experienced in my own life with so many other people.

*Interviewer:* Wrapping up, looking back during the Civil Rights Movement and looking at today, what do you personally feel has changed the most?

*Rev. Kyles:* Oh my God. Hmm. So much has changed. Everything has changed. I am so thrilled about today, and the events leading up today.

00:43:47

I was a part of a group who found ballots that they had hidden when Harold Ford, Sr. won the congressional seat. The white people had taken that ballots and hidden them away so we couldn't – we don't how many times they did that, but some dear person, housekeeping or something, said, "Ya'll better check that room in there. I see a lot of people going in and out of there." Went in there and found the ballot boxes, and the current congressman was on the television giving his victory speech when they passed him a note, and said they found some other ballots that Mr. Ford was the winner. He spent 22 years in the Congress.

Harold Jr. followed his dad at everywhere he went. I have pictures in my office where he's about that big, and we at a breakfast or something and he's right there with his dad.

00:44:57

And now to see the kind of race, win or lose, to see the kind of race that he has run, to see the endorsement in today's paper, or papers of little small towns in Tennessee, and when he announced that he was going to run for the Senate. Matter of fact, when he ran for the Congress when his dad didn't run anymore, he was only 26 years old, but he knew politics. He was born and raised in politics. He has run a race that is textbook, even with all the negative commercials.

I didn't know I lived to see that, a young African-American get the kind of support he has gotten from black and white people. In rural Tennessee, papers endorsing him, little town of Jackson, Tennessee, and other little places.

00:45:55



To see how well he represents himself, my heart just beats with joy, that I lived to see this, to see signs with Harold Ford, Jr.'s name on 'em, on Walnut Grove Road, past Tillman, all the way to Baptist Hospital where I had my surgery. That is so powerful for me. It really is. It doesn't mean that it's over. It isn't only that – it's a societal change.

**Video Cut (.flv)**

(46:28;29)

I don't think black people have changed that much. The change on the black side is to have the audacity to run for these high offices in areas that are not predominantly black. This hasn't been done before. Many of the guys who were running were not – they're products of the Civil Rights Movement, but they were not in the movement, so their mindset is different. It's all together different.

0:47:00

Harold Jr. can match intellect with any of them that's up there, but to have that the audacity to run for senate. When he announced it, I was like, "Oh, yeah, right. Fords again." This boy was so serious and he could see. That's what's so important about seeing what children need to see that they can do this. Barack did it in Illinois against all the odds. So you can say, "Maybe we can have one." We can have one. There is one. Touch him. Feel him. He's out there. It's very important.

But White America has also changed. They've changed more than we have. They've changed a great deal, and we're **better off for it**.

00:48:02

What I will say, the seed to a new problem is always found in the solution of the old, by the time you solve the problem you've **created others**. As wonderful as that computer, one of the great inventions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, look at the kind of stuff it's causing. The privacy's gone. There's no such thing as privacy anymore. You can on that thing and find out anything you want to find out. That's it.

This is the very house – I had just moved here in January of '68. Dinner was gonna be served here April. Dining room, we had tables in here. Dining room table.

00:49:03

I told Martin dinner was at 5:00. He called the house. I didn't know he had called the house, and they told him dinner was at 6. So when I went to the motel to get him, he said, "Oh, no, dinner's not until 6, and I am in no hurry. Have a seat." Abernathy was in the room. King was in room, and I was in the room. Three preachers in a room. By saying that and going at that hour, it gave me the wonderful privilege to spend the last hour of his life on earth, King's life, Room 306. And of the three, Abernathy, King, and Kyles, I am the only one left.

00:50:04

The world wants to know, "What did three preachers talk about? What did you do the last hour of his life?" Most people kind of think it was something deep and philosophical, but it wasn't because we didn't know it was the last hour. We weren't in meditation. We were cracking jokes. He had preached himself through the fear of death. He got it out of it. When he decided to come to Memphis to help the garbage workers, once he got involved, and that march broke up in violence, he was so hurt.

That last speech that he made almost didn't happen. There were tornado warnings that night. It was thundering and lightening. He felt there wouldn't be many people at the church, so he sent several us over and said, "You guys go have the meeting. I'm gonna stay here and work on the Poor People's Campaign."

00:51:07

When we got to the church it was nearly full in spite of the weather. Abernathy said, "These people didn't come to hear us. They clapping 'cause they think Martin coming in behind us." So he went to the phone and called Martin and said, "Man, you should get over here. These people have come in the weather to hear you." He said, "If you think I need to come, I'll come." So he came over. He didn't take a topic that night. He just started speaking from his heart.

Talked about the time the woman stabbed him in his chest with a letter opener. He got greetings from all over the world, but the most telling came from a young girl who wrote:

Dear Dr. King,

I read about your misfortune and I'm so sorry. *The New York Times* said the blade of the letter opener was so close to your aorta

that if you had sneezed, you would have drowned in your own blood.

She put at the bottom, "I'm so glad you didn't sneeze."

00:52:08

He picked up on that and did a whole litany, "And I'm glad I didn't sneeze. If I'd sneezed, I would have missed the Selma-to-Montgomery March. If I'd sneezed, I would've missed the Birmingham **Crisis**. If I had sneezed, I would've missed the young people sitting here and all over the south for their rights. If I had sneezed, I would have missed the chance to tell America and the world about a dream I had one August day in Washington D.C." He just went on about what he would have missed had he sneezed.

By that time, we were on our feet. We were crying. We didn't know why we were crying. We had no way of knowing that would be the last speech of his life. It just got the fear of death of out of him. He said, "I may not get there, but you will get to the Promised Land, because God has allowed me to go up on the mountain and I've looked over and I've seen the Promiseland. I may not get there, but you will get there."

00:53:00

He said, "Tonight, I'm not fearing any man. My eyes have seen the coming of the glory of the Lord." The next day, he was in a lighthearted mood. He and Andy Young woke up pillow fighting. He came **out of the room**. When I got there, I said, "5:00." He said, "Oh, no, dinner's not until 6." I had moved in this house in January, this was April. He said, "Did you get a new house?" I said, "Yeah. How did you know?" He said, "I have my sources."

**Video Cut (.flv)**

(53:33;00)

He said, "I don't want you to be like that preacher in Atlanta. I'm not gonna call his name 'cause you might know him. He bought a new house. He invited me and Corretta to dinner. We went to the house. It was a beautiful house, gorgeous. We got inside. He didn't have a stick of furniture. We had to eat dinner on a card table and folding chairs. The Kool-Aid was hot. The ham was cold. The biscuits were hard."

00:54:02

He said, "Now if I go to your house and discover that you have a house and can't buy food, I will broadcast it on all the networks, 'Kyles bought a house. Can't buy food.'" Just lighthearted stuff. Ralph had washed his shirt. He couldn't put it on 'cause he couldn't button. I picked out his tie. We had those just lighthearted conversations.

About a quarter to six we walk on balcony. Ralph was still shaving and putting on – we walked out the door and stood on the balcony. He was greeting people in the courtyard down below, that he had not seen. He saw Jesse Jackson. He said, "Jesse, don't take that band to Kyles's house." Jesse brought a band down from Chicago. He said, "I'm not taking the band, but I want you meet the band leader." So they started walking towards the balcony to meet Dr. King with the bandleader.

00:55:05

Martin stood here, and I stood here. I said, "Guys, we have rally tonight and we got to go to dinner." I turned and walked. I got a few steps away from King. Ralph was still in the room. Jesse was down below. Martin was leaning over the balcony talking to Jesse, and the shot rang out, "**Kapow!**" I looked back and saw he had been knocked from the railing back onto the porch. I rushed to his side. There was a gaping hole in the right side of his face. There was a bigger wound under his shirt I could not see. Blood was everywhere.

I ran in the room and picked up the phone to call the ambulance. I was beating on the walls, "Answer the phone! Answer the phone!" When the operator heard the shot, she left the switchboard. You couldn't use the phone without the switchboard.

00:56:02

She came out. Looked up and saw what had happened, and she had a heart attack on the spot, and she fell in the courtyard. There was nobody on the switchboard. I came back out. The police were coming at this time. I said to them, "Call an ambulance on your police radio! Dr. King has been shot!" And they said, "Where did the shot come from?" So there's a picture of us pointing to the building across the street. The pointing is the response to the police saying, "Where did the shot come from?"

I took a spread from one the beds. The police came and stopped people from coming up. A few people did come up. I covered him from his neck down. There was so much blood everywhere. We

finally got somebody on the switchboard. I told Jesse to call Mrs. King, and I'd call my house.

00:55:57

The ambulance came. I told them what hospital to take him to, and they did. We waited, and we waited, and we waited. Finally, the word came that we lost him. We lost him. After all these years, I have no words to express my feeling. They're just there. To be standing with your friend and in one millisecond, he's taken so violently.

I wondered, "Why was I there?" We were friends before he was famous and all that, but why was I there at that moment in time. And then over the years, God revealed to me why I was there. I was there to be a witness, crucifixions have to have witnesses. My witness has to be true. A lying witness is dangerous. A witness who has information they won't share is of no consequence. And so my witness has to be true.

00:58:03

Martin Luther King didn't die in some foolish way. He didn't overdose. He wasn't shot by a jealous lover. He wasn't shot leaving the scene of a crime. He was a man with an earned PhD degree at 28, a Noble Peace Prize, the youngest at that to ever get one. Oratorical skills off the charts. All the things he could have been, U.N. ambassadors, big churches all over America. He could have been a university president. All the things he could have been, and here he is with all of these skills, dying on a balcony in Memphis, Tennessee, helping garbage workers.

And they said, "We will shoot this dreamer and see what happens to his dream." That's where the witness comes in. The witness will tell all who will listen, a dream, is still alive.

00:59:07

Thank you very much.

*Interviewer:*

Once again, we really want to thank you for being here today, sharing with us your stories, so we can in turn, share with so many others. So thank you once again.

*Rev. Kyles:*

My pleasure.

*[End of Audio]*