

Martin Luther King Jr. (center) leads protesters during the March on Washington on August 28, 1963.

He Had a Dream

Martin Luther King Jr. died 50 years ago. His youngest child discusses his heroic struggle for equal rights.

On April 3, 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. arrived in Memphis, Tennessee. At the time, he was the leading voice of the civil rights movement. That was the long struggle to gain equal rights for African-Americans. King was in Memphis to support the city's black sanitation workers. They were fighting for safer working conditions and better pay.

Tragically, King was killed the next day. He was shot while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel.

Words to Know

boycott *noun*. a type of protest in which people refuse to use a service or buy a product

legacy *noun*. the lasting impact of a person or thing

People around the world mourned the loss of King—none more so than his family. Bernice King, the youngest of his four kids, was 5 years old at the time. Fifty years later, she remembers her father's message of working peacefully to bring about change.

"He sacrificed his life for the betterment of the world," Bernice says.

An "Ordinary" Kid

Martin Luther King Jr. is remembered as a hero. But Bernice King says we shouldn't think of him as a "superhero."

"He was really an ordinary person who was able to do extraordinary things," she says.

Born in 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia, King was a lot like

other kids. He pulled pranks with his siblings, didn't like to do the dishes, and loved baseball.

King grew up in an unjust society. In Southern states, segregation was the law. African-Americans were forced to use separate bathrooms and attend different schools than white people. In addition, many states had other racist laws that limited black people's basic rights, including the right to vote in elections.

Fighting for Equality

King became a leader in the civil rights movement in December 1955. At the time, he was the pastor of a church in Montgomery, Alabama. The city was one of many in the South that didn't allow black people to

sit in the same section as white people on city buses. King helped organize a **boycott** of the city's buses. It lasted more than a year. It finally ended when the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed segregation on public buses.

The Montgomery bus boycott made King famous. It also marked the first of many times that he would use nonviolent methods, like peaceful marches, to protest unfair laws.

King's efforts helped bring about many positive changes. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson. It outlawed segregation in public places. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 made it illegal to prevent people from voting because of their race. Even after these victories, King continued to work to gain equal rights for people who were treated unfairly because of the color of their skin.

The Ultimate Sacrifice

Sadly, many Americans did not share King's dream of equality. He was viewed as a threat by many white Americans who didn't think black people deserved the same rights that they had. King and his family received numerous death threats, and their house was bombed. Bernice King says what made her father such a special leader was that he wasn't afraid to die for what he believed in.

"I think [he] knew that he was not going to live a long life—that at any given moment he was going to be taken from us," she says.

"I have a dream 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."

—Martin Luther King Jr. during his "I Have a Dream" speech on August 28, 1963

King plays with his daughter Bernice in the backyard of their home in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1964.

The night before he was killed, King gave one of his most famous speeches. He said he imagined a day when America would truly be a land of equality. But he knew that he might not live to see it.

"I've seen the Promised Land," King told a huge audience in Memphis. "I may

not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!"

Though his voice was silenced the next day, King's message lived on. Other civil rights leaders stepped in to keep the movement going. Among them was King's wife, Coretta Scott King.

Each January, we celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. Day. The holiday has become a national day of service. Millions of volunteers help others in their communities in King's honor.

"I think his greatest **legacy** is teaching us a way to really, frankly, get along in the world," says Bernice King.

—by Joe Bubar

Visitors take photos at the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Washington, D.C.

"I've Been to the Mountaintop"

Watch a video clip of Martin Luther King Jr.'s last speech:
www.scholastic.com/sn4