

The March on Washington August 28, 1963
By Gayle Hamlett, Psy.D.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am grateful for this opportunity to write this story about the March on Washington which was a significant event in the history of the United States of America. This story is about those of us Black activists from Denver who were there.

Lift every voice and sing, Till earth and heaven ring, Ring with the harmonies of liberty; Let our rejoicing rise High as the list'ning skies, Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.

In the spring of 1963, I was a sophomore at Colorado State College (now UNC) in Greeley, CO. This was my first experience with blatant racism. There were only 37 Negroes on campus. Most of us were from Denver, Colorado Springs, Pueblo and some from Florida, New York and Texas. We did everything together, including studying, traveling to other campuses, partying, playing cards, studying the writings of our Black intellectuals i.e. W.E.B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington, James Baldwin, Franz Fanon, Martin Luther King, Jr. and many more. There were four main Social Justice organizations at the time, NAACP, CORE, SNCC, and the Urban League. We had a CORE Chapter in Greeley— The Congress of Racial Equality- which we all belonged to. It was at a CORE meeting in Boulder that the head of CORE, James Forman came to speak to students. He was so dynamic he set our hearts on fire. The struggle was always about Freedom from oppression and voting rights. We learned there was to be a major “March on Washington” in August. The March was organized by the leaders of these organizations under the guidance of A. Phillip Randolph, who was a labor organizer for the Pullman Porters, and he published the Messenger newspaper. He was described by the Attorney General as the most dangerous Negro in America because of his power to reach and influence so many Black people. There were about 60 people from Denver, mainly African American college students, civil rights activists, and some Jewish, white, and Latinx allies who were selected to go.

Before I go into the events leading up to the “March,” I must share with you our upbringing. Those of us from Denver grew up in a “Beloved Community,” described by John Lewis, “Old Denver” called by many of us. Our ancestors came from the South to the West with the dust of slavery on their backs, in search of a better life. My ancestors came from Mississippi and Louisiana, where there were lynchings and atrocities against Black people on a regular basis. My great grandmother was able to be on the inside of white people’s conversations and would overhear schemes to lynch Black men, many of them family, for looking or smiling at a white woman. She was able to get these men out of Mississippi and on a train to Denver and freedom. My aunt came to Denver in 1914 as a teen, from Greenwood, Mississippi. She married and with her husband and sons, they established a cab company, The Ritz Cab, and a restaurant the Ritz Café that provided jobs for cousins and others who escaped from Mississippi. My family along with 10 other African American families went on to create this Beloved Community.

This Beloved Community of “Colored People” all from African descent lived in the Five Points Neighborhood in central Denver. Due to red-lining and unequal housing restrictions, we lived in the neighborhood which has the boundaries 18th Ave. south, High St. on the east and 36th Ave. on the north. To the west was the Five Points, our downtown. We had everything we needed: grocery stores, banks, recreation centers, flower shops, hospitals, hair saloons, barber shops, and drug stores. Many of our men worked for the railroads as porters and waiters. Being a Pullman Porter was the

best job. The schools were integrated with most going to Whittier, Ebert, Mitchell and Wyman. There were 2 main high schools, Manual and East. There was always a rivalry between the two high schools, especially in basketball. Denver Public Schools would not hire Black teachers until the late 1940s when they experimented with the “Colored Project,” then a core of excellent teachers trained in Black HBCU’s became our teachers. There was a group of excellent Black teachers that were assigned to Whittier, Cole and Manual. There were famous Jazz clubs and restaurants. There were daycare centers for the babies, YMCA and YWCA for dances and camping at Lookout Mountain. Lincoln Hills was a mountain resort establish by African Americans as a place to get away in the beautiful mountains and a safe refuge from the KKK. It is located in a secret place that only we knew how to find. Famous jazz musicians would go there for recreation and respite. Denver was known as the place for the best Jazz between Kansas City and California. There was always music in the air. Famous musicians like Duke Ellington and Count Basie would stay with relatives of mine because they could not stay in hotels downtown due to segregation. The Klan was always around, but I did not know it until later. They would bomb houses of Blacks who moved outside the “Red Line.” We knew of a Black doctor who dared to build a house on Gaylord St. His house was bombed and burned to the ground by the KKK.

What makes for a Beloved Community, you might ask. We were bound by a set of values that defined our identity and way of life. First is our Faith and Spirituality. The Black Church was the center of our village. Everyone believed in God and knew who God is. There were churches all along Ogden Street and around a few block radius. Families were identified by the church they belonged to. I grew up at Zion Baptist Church on 24th and Ogden. I became Catholic when I was 10. My faith foundation was in the Black Church under the guidance of Rev. W.T. Liggins who was a master preacher. Black people are an oral people who follow an oral tradition where preaching and teaching of the Word are the center of our reality. Rev. Liggins made all of the people in the Bible come alive. He told the stories in the Bible as Our Story out of the bondage of slavery. I would attend the 8:30 mass at Loyola (all in Latin) and then go down 24th Ave to Zion for 11:00 church. Another value in the Community was our belief in the family or group over the individual. “I am because we are, because we are I am.” This compared to Western thinking, “I am because I think I am,” which values self. The family structure or system was sacred. Families were intergenerational, five layers – the unborn, children, adults, elders, and spirits or ancestors. There was and is a deep respect for elders, viewed as the Wisdom Keepers. There is an oral tradition of collective lessons of life experiences from one generation to another through folk tales, biblical verses and proverbs. Example: What goes around comes around; God don’t like ugly; one monkey don’t stop no show. Traditionally, the family rather than the individual is at the center of one’s universe. These are traditional African values passed down. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you, Love God with your whole heart and your whole mind and love your neighbor as you love yourself. Forgive those who persecute you for they know not what they do. Know who and whose you are. Even though the slave owners tried to disrupt this ethos by the malicious separation of the enslaved African men, women and children from each other, there was already an indelible imprint on our souls that we are the Children of the Light. We found each other because we see each other. Our ancestors knew that the children in the Beloved Community are precious. Those of us who grew up in Old Denver were treated as the Precious Ones. The quest for justice and freedom is in our DNA.

Sing a song full of the faith that dark past has taught us, Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us; facing the rising sun Of our new day begun. Let us march on till victory is won.

The Civil Rights Movement was an organized effort by African Americans to end racial discrimination and gain equal rights under the law. The history of systemic racism goes all the way back to 1619 and before. Lynchings and murders of Black people continue today in the form of mass incarceration and police brutality. The events leading up to the March in 1963, shine a light on the reasons to March.

July 26, 1948 – President Truman issues executive order to end segregation in the Armed Services. Black soldiers went to other countries to fight and die for freedom and democracy, but when they returned to the U.S., they were treated as less than second class citizens, denied the rights they fought and died for.

May 17, 1954 – Brown v. Board of Education. Supreme Court decides an ending to racial segregation in public schools, however, they remained segregated.

August 28, 1955- Emmett Till, a 14 year old from Chicago is brutally murdered in Mississippi for flirting with a white woman. His murderers are acquitted, and the case brings international attention to the movement after Jet magazine publishes a photo of Till's beaten body at his open casket funeral. (I was 12 years old when that happened, and it made a lasting impression.)

Dec 1, 1955 – Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat to a white man on Montgomery bus. Resulted in 1 year bus boycott.

Sept. 4, 1957 – Nine Black students are blocked from integrating into Little Rock Central High School. President Eisenhower eventually sends federal troops to escort students who continued to be harassed.

1961 – Black and white activists known as Freedom Riders took bus trips throughout the South to protest segregation in bus stations, restrooms and lunch counters for “whites only.” The Freedom Rides were marked by horrific violence from white Americans. They drew international attention to the cause.

The March on Washington Aug.28, 1963

We started our journey on Sunday, Aug. 25th leaving from Shorter AME church on a Freedom Bus. We drove straight through to Jefferson City, MO. We stayed in a Church. I remember feeling like I was on an adventure filled with great expectations. Not knowing what or why. Coming from Denver, my eyes were opened to the ways of the South. We would have people staring at us black and white people on a bus singing about “We Shall Overcome.” We stopped in Hannibal, MO where the people would not serve us in the café, so they had us come to the back door and receive our sack lunches through the window. I remember the National Guard escorting us across the bridge of the Mississippi River. Monday, Aug. 26 we drove to Indianapolis and stayed at the All Souls Unitarian Church. I remember cots all around in the dining hall. Tuesday, Aug 27 we drove to Washington, PA where we stayed. I remember walking through this hilly town noticing the difference in the landscape. We laughed and made jokes and had fun being ourselves. On the next day, we drove from there to Washington D.C. and on to the March. I had never seen so many Black people. It filled me with a sense of pride and solidarity. I remember the singing of Freedom Songs, “We Shall Overcome,” “We’ve come this far by faith, leaning on the Lord,” and “Oh, Freedom.” I remember seeing the leaders that we had heard about at the Lincoln Memorial. Approximately 250,000 people took part in the March for Freedom and Jobs. I remember seeing the six leaders – Whitney Young, Jr. of the National Urban League, A. Philip Randolph, the main strategist and labor union organizer for the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, John Lewis from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., representing the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), James Farmer, Jr. of the Congress of Racial Equality, and Roy Wilkins of the NAACP. At the time all I knew for sure was that this was a significant event in my life, but I didn’t realize the impact until years later. Martin Luther King, Jr.

gave his "I have a Dream" speech as the closing address in front of the Lincoln Memorial, stating, "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

Those of us who went on this historic March have a closeness that has endured. All of us made a promise to each other and to ourselves to continue the struggle for Freedom and Equality. Even though this was a pivotal moment in time, the struggle continued. Less than three weeks later, on Sept. 15, 1963 a bomb at the 16th street Baptist Church in Birmingham killed four young girls and injured several other people prior to Sunday services. In July of 1964, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, preventing employment discrimination due to race, color, sex, religion or national origin. Less than a year later, on March 7, 1965 was Bloody Sunday. In the Selma to Montgomery March, around 600 civil rights marchers walked from Selma, Alabama to Montgomery in protest of black voter suppression. Local police blocked and brutally attacked them. After successfully fighting in court for their right to march, Martin Luther King, Jr. and others successfully led two more marches and finally reached Montgomery on March 25.

In the summer of 1965, there were multiple altercations when Marquette Frye was arrested by a white California Highway Patrol officer on suspicion of driving while intoxicated. The Watts riots began after no arrests of police. Largest riots so far.

April 4, 1968 Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, TN by James Earl Ray, convicted in 1969. Riots broke out all over the country in protest.

Now here we are 50 some years later with the same issues, police brutality, voter suppression, and the killing of Black men and women at the hands of police. Here it is the anniversary of Elijah McClain's murder at the hands of police, no justice. I, like John Lewis, am optimistic however, to see this Movement with so many joining Black Lives Matter. I believe the pandemic is part of God's plan to awaken us. This is the time of Revelation where this country must face itself. It's as if the Holy Spirit w transforming us toward the light and away from darkness. I am so grateful to the Good Lord for allowing me to be a witness to this transformation.

Praise God!

God of our weary years, God of our silent tears, Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way; Thou who hast by thy might, Led us into the light, Keep us forever in the path, we pray. Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met thee, Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, we forget thee; Shadowed beneath thy hand, May we forever stand, True to our God, True to our native land.