

How Close Are We to Dr. King's Mountaintop?

Houston, TX – Black History Month has an added poignancy this year, as it is almost 40 years to the day, since Martin Luther King delivered his “I Have Been to the Mountaintop” speech. In the four decades since that momentous occasion, there have been great strides in civil rights and racial relations – the fact that there is a Black History Month at all would have been unthinkable in 1968.

Some of the progress includes Senator Barack Obama winning a presidential caucus in a predominately 'White' state like Iowa. Conversely, there have been recent reminders of America's deep racial divide with cases like the Jena 6 in Louisiana. So how far has America really come since MLK declared on April 3, 1968; “I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land”?

“I was 19 when Dr. King made that speech,” recalls Willie Alexander, former NFL Cornerback and author of ‘Entering the Promise Land.’ “Three years later I was in the NFL and I thought I'd escaped discrimination. Turns out I was wrong.”

Raised in segregation-era Montgomery, Alabama, Willie had first-hand experience of the problems caused by racial strife. Being a Houston Oilers Defensive Back brought about stardom, but re-entering the ‘real world’ as a black business owner made Alexander realize a lot of work needed to be done before African-Americans could realize the dream of Dr. King's ‘Promised Land.’

Since his retirement from the NFL in 1980 he has concentrated on building his own business in Houston. Through his own experiences, Alexander found most African-American businesses struggle to do commerce in a predominantly white-business marketplace, and thus struggle to turn a profit.

“At first I was just a young man dealing with experienced executives, so I didn't expect it to be easy,” says Alexander. “But what I do find troubling is that even though I'm now an experienced businessman and company chairman in my late 50's, when I deal with less experienced managers I am still having to swim against the tide because I'm a black businessman.”

Alexander is using his book ‘Entering the Promised Land’ and Black History Month to encourage Black Americans to embrace Rev. Martin Luther King's economic blue print, which called for spending money with institutions that supported the Black Community, thereby creating a stronger Black economic base.

The night before his assassination, Dr. King's final words spoke about his hope for America's future, “He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. 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.”

Over the span of his unique life, Willie Alexander has personally seen how far up ‘the mountain’ Black Americans have been. But he hopes that the 40th anniversary of that speech and the embracing of Dr. King's message will finally mark the conquering of the summit thereby helping all Americans with dreams of ‘Entering the Promised Land.’

Willie Alexander's website can be found at www.EnteringThePromisedLand.com

About the Author

Willie Alexander is best known as a Houston Oilers Defensive Back, a position he played for nine seasons. He founded W.J. Alexander & Associates in 1980, a full-service employee benefits consulting and insurance brokerage firm in Houston, Texas. Willie also serves on public and private sector boards, including the Amegy Bank of Texas, Greater Houston Partnership and the Texas Children's Hospital, and has been a prime activist in numerous charities throughout his sporting and business career. Born in Montgomery, Alabama during the segregation era, Willie witnessed first-hand the rise and success of the civil rights movement, which had a lasting impact upon him. He has a bachelor's degree in business administration from Alcorn State University in Mississippi and he lives in Houston with his wife of 36 years. He has three children.

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