

JoAnna Duncan

Member, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated
Iota Lambda Chapter
University of Florida

Speech in Remembrance of Mrs. Coretta Scott King

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Good evening. First I would like to say that I am truly honored to be blessed with the privilege of being here today to commemorate the life and legacy of Mrs. Coretta Scott King.

As a little girl in school, I remember always learning about Dr. Martin Luther King and coloring pictures of Mrs. Rosa Parks during Black History Month. But if any of you are like me, your teachers seemed to neglect the story of Coretta Scott King in those lesson plans.

Born April 27, 1927, Coretta Scott King was taught the importance of hard work, commitment, and education at a very young age. Her parents, Obediah and Bernice Scott, were not educated themselves, but constantly stressed the importance of education in their home to Coretta and her older sister and younger brother. At the tender age of 10 years old, she began working in the cotton fields of Alabama and still managed to make the 3-mile trip everyday to attend her local one-room school. Coretta would often quote her mother saying, “she would go to college even if she only had one dress to put on.” As she was raised in the church, she developed a deep love for music, and later went on to enroll in the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston where she earned a degree in voice and violin. She also attended Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio on scholarship along with her sister, as one of the few black students. Prior

to her marriage, she began public service, joining the local NAACP chapter and Race Relations and Civil Liberties Committee.

It was in Boston that she met Martin Luther King, Jr. and one year later they were wed. Her marriage to Dr. King gave her a mission of the highest importance and she remained committed to that mission until her last days.

Mrs. Coretta Scott King was not simply the wife of the great Martin Luther King, Jr. Mrs. King worked tirelessly with her husband both on the front lines and behind the scenes. She was his constant partner and confidant traveling along side her husband internationally to Ghana, India, and Norway among other places throughout the Civil Rights Movement. Dr. King stated, "I came to see the real meaning of that rather trite statement: "A wife can either make or break a husband." Coretta proved to be the type of wife with qualities to make a husband when he could have been so easily broken. In the darkest moments she always brought "the light of hope." Mrs. King's fortitude, strength, and composure aided her husband in the midst of the tensions and obstacles surrounding the Movement. When her husband was stabbed by a demented woman in Harlem, she maintained her poise and comforted him with calmness and grace when most others would have easily been shaken with despair.

You see, Coretta Scott King was a champion of social change in her own right as she remained dedicated to producing changes for African Americans in the United States. She unselfishly shared her husband with the world, and at times she even shared her home as they opened their living room to serve as a temporary headquarters during the Movement. Even in her home she instilled that same passion for social justice and nonviolent social change in her family,

including her four children Yolanda, Martin Luther King III, Dexter and Bernice. She proved truly to be an amazing woman, balancing the roles of wife, mother, activist, and church leader. Using her talents, she eagerly performed concerts to raise funds for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), of which Dr. King was first president.

Following his death, Mrs. King immediately went to work with local, state, and national government to declare his birthday a national holiday, preserving his legacy. She created the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change and worked for that cause for the rest of her life. Between 1968- 1995 she worked to found the King Center historic national park to commemorate the late African- American leader. As the Founding President, Chair, and Chief Operating Executive Officer, she dedicated herself to providing local, national and international programs that have trained tens of thousands of people in Dr. King's nonviolence philosophy and methods.

It was Coretta's greatest desire to carry the message of peace and nonviolence throughout the world. As an activist, she committed to the peace movement and was one of the first to convince her husband to speak out against the Vietnam War. In the 1980's, she also orchestrated sit-ins in Washington, DC in opposition to the apartheid crimes in South Africa. Her travels led her to South Africa where she met with Winnie Mandela, wife of Nelson Mandela, in 1986. Upon her return to the United States, she pressed for economic sanctions against South Africa. She served several groups for women's welfare and worker's rights including the Women's Strike for Peace and the National Committee for Full Employment.

Mrs. King added the title of author to her name when she wrote *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.*, and also wrote a regular newspaper column. She received honorary degrees from highly esteemed colleges including Duke and Princeton University. Also an honorary member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., she received the Congressional Gold Medal and the Gandhi Peace Prize. Later, a medal for children's literature by authors of African descent was established in her name and is awarded annually.

But amidst a slew of accomplishments, her balancing act as a mother, wife, activist, and church leader, is the legacy she leaves us with today. So I ask you now, how will you carry on this legacy? Coretta Scott King raised the bar of commitment, humanitarianism, and service to the betterment of all peoples. She and Dr. King shared a vision of helping black Americans realize that they were somebody and that they could overcome an oppressive system. They just had to act and refuse to merely be spectators, watching life pass from a distance. She worked unselfishly devoting her life to this mission that she and Dr. Martin Luther King set forth many years ago. She was obedient to God's will for her life and carried on without question or veering off track. She embodied the loving and caring spirit that we should all work emulate.

So my goal today is not to just list all the amazing things that Ms. King accomplished, although I urge you to continue to explore the work that she did. But of all her contributions, the greatest is what she is to me. Her life is a model of all I hope to be. I represent a new generation. Yes, a Facebook obsessed, online blogging generation of black leaders that may be strangers to sit-ins -- BUT are MORE than familiar with discrimination, and possess a willingness to

work toward its demise. And because of Mrs. King, I am passionate about carrying on her vision of overcoming racial oppression, civil injustice, and social economic shortcomings. I look back at her life, then ask myself, “How am I keeping the Dream alive?” I see that it is no longer enough to just sit and reminisce about what they did - to show up to a walk once a year in an MLK T-shirt or to attend a few programs in their honor. The time has come for this generation to take ownership of our community- to claim responsibility for the necessary and long overdue advancement of the black community. In the words of Mrs. King HERSELF, “Struggle is a never ending process. Freedom is never really won, you earn it and win it in every generation...”. And I am proud to represent this new generation.

So, I am here humbly representing that future that Dr. King so vividly imagined. I stand here today with just 20 years behind me, but with a heart so passionate, and so on fire to move forward with the dream of Coretta Scott King: The dream of prosperity of all people and the elimination of discrimination so that we may all finally be equal. Our great leaders have inspired me to use my life to reach higher and higher towards the dream. I have recognized my calling to cultivate and promote leaders in young people like myself, and I am actively doing my part to see modern day Coretta Scott Kings and Martin Luther Kings.

Still today in 2008 the work is far from being complete. Tonight, right here in Gainesville, a child will go home to an empty house and go to bed without a meal. There are still men and women who will not vote because they never learned to read or write. Now, 40 years after Dr. King’s death, qualified people will be turned down for jobs because of the color of their skin. And tomorrow I

will return to a public university classroom where I am still the only black girl. Take a moment and think: How many times you've seen a homeless man or woman and looked the other way, trying not to make eye contact, and pretending they are not there? How many more times will you look the other way and pretend a problem doesn't exist? There is still much work to be done. Fifty years ago the University of Florida refused to admit any black students. Just Fifty years ago. Today I am standing here because someone refused to accept rejection and the discrimination they endured. I stand here because someone had the courage to claim the education to which they were entitled. I am here because of those people who would not give up. That is why I will not give up. It is not okay for me to sit and accept the injustice which permeates the lives of African Americans today. It is not okay. So I say to you, what are you doing to turn the dream on its head and change the world?

I am forever indebted to her for the work that she did, because I know that I would not be here today if it were not for Mrs. Coretta Scott King. I know that, and I honor that. Today, I celebrate her courage and I OWE HER to succeed. I am honored and blessed to be standing here today, and I know that it is the legacy of selfless giving that she leaves that's most important. I, JoAnna Duncan, am your future. I am doing my part to see those long awaited changes and continue the work of Coretta Scott King.

As I leave you today, I would like to you to remember the words of Horace Mann often quoted by Mrs. King: "Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity."

Thank you.