

## **Beyond reflections, we need a 2013 movement**

Written by Scott Gray, MUL President/CEO  
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Each Black History Month, for many African Americans there is always a deeper reflection on the events of the past and how our history has shaped the present and the implications for our future.

As I reflect this month, I am reminded of the power of a movement to drive change in our communities and transform our futures.

For a movement to ignite, at least one person must have the courage to stand up and remain steadfast in the face of challenges, naysayers, discouragers and dream crushers. None of us can begin to imagine what would have happened if the movement builders had not chosen to stand up in 1963.

### **Recipe for a Movement**

In the year 1963 there were many pivotal days in the historic Civil Rights Movement: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote "Letter from A Birmingham Jail; May 3, 1963." Medgar Evers, leader of the Mississippi NAACP, was murdered outside his home after attending a civil rights speech delivered by then President John F. Kennedy, Jr. On August 28, 1963 200,000 blacks and whites gathered at the Lincoln Memorial to hear dialogues about ending racism and segregationist practices. Among the speakers was Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who gave the memorable "I Have a Dream" speech. Sunday, September 15th, 1963, the 16th Street Baptist Church was bombed, killing four little girls who had been at the church attending Sunday School, and November 22, 1963, was the day President John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

President John F. Kennedy, in his civil rights speech of June 11, 1963, the day Medgar Evers was killed, had called for a 'Civil Right Act,' asking for legislation "giving all Americans the right to be served in facilities which are open to the public; hotels, restaurants, theaters, retail stores, and similar establishments," as well as "greater protection for the right to vote." Kennedy had delivered this speech following a series of protests from the African-American community, the most concurrent being the Birmingham campaign which concluded in May 1963.

Each of these major events and countless other incidents, conversations, brainstorming sessions, activities, strategic planning and movement building acts performed by other people from all walks of life and ethnic backgrounds converged and became a recipe for the Civil Right Movement. All of these moments in time led to the passage of the Civil Rights Act on July 1, 1964 and the Voting Rights Act August 10, 1965.

### **A Blueprint for Closing the Gap**

Right here in Minneapolis, while a number of indicators report that the city is thriving even in these days of economic challenge, when you look closely and segment this information by ethnic group, the disparities in our city are among some of the worse in the nation. For the second year in a row, the Economic Policy Institute reports that our city has the greatest employment disparity between whites and blacks in the nation at 3:1. When it comes to health disparities, access and quality of care, more disparities. Wealth accumulation, continued sluggish progress; and when it comes to the creation of generational wealth, dismal.

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Educational underachievement, affordable housing, still a slew of unaddressed needs. Report after report and countless committees discuss poverty reduction, educational gains and the need to improve job seeker employability by eliminating skill gaps. Yet, as a community, and sadly as a nation, we find ourselves stuck at the discussion table making limited progress in our quest to reach a position of sustainable solutions.

On the Time Magazine List of Top Ten American Protest Movements, which also includes the Civil Rights Movement, it is interesting to note that all of the other movements have replicated the protest elements of the Civil Rights Movement; a movement considered a success, a movement viewed as a blueprint for creating change.

Key words in defining a movement are **attaining an end**, so I challenge us all to ask ourselves the questions, "When will disparities finally be eradicated so that measures of success will be equal regardless of ethnicity? When, if ever, will the gaps in employment, housing, health care, financial stability, and education attainment be closed?"

I was moved recently when Harry Belafonte accepted the Springarm Award during the NAACP Image Awards a few weeks back. He challenged that we must "unleash radical thought" during the movement that exists today. Part of his speech was as follows:  
*"What is missing, I think, from the equation in our struggle today is that we must unleash radical thought... America has never been moved to perfect our desire for greater democracy without radical thinking and radical voices being at the helm of any such quest."*

Each of us must take personal responsibility and be willing to invest the time and energy required to both recognize and maximize opportunities that are presented to us; opportunities that can improve our quality of life.

While many will argue that there is still much work to do, and that inequalities persist, I say sadly that will always be a part of the human experience. There will always be work to do, but progress can always be made, just as change is constant. The Civil Right Movement can serve as our blueprint for the NEXT MOVEMENT.

For, the Civil Rights Movement teaches us that when people from all walks of life, from diverse ethnic groups decide to unite to halt injustice; when they cry out for human dignity, respect and opportunity, they become an unstoppable force which refuses to be denied until an end is achieved.