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WHAT MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. MEANT TO NEW YORK

By John Leland, January 11, 2018



The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., though most associated with the South, had deep ties to New York City, dating back to the fall of 1950, when he served as a student pastor every other month at the First Baptist Church in East Elmhurst, Queens. The senior pastor there gave him a B for “pulpit ability,” knocking him for “aloofness.” That would change. The city almost saw the end of his career as well: at a 1958 book signing in Harlem, a woman named Izola Ware Curry stabbed him in the chest with a letter opener, convinced that Dr. King and others in the movement were plotting against her (she was committed to a hospital for the criminally insane). Dr. King remembered the incident in his “I Have Been to the Mountaintop” speech a day before his death, noting that if he had sneezed while the blade was in him, he would not have survived to see the gains of the movement he led. “I’m so happy that I didn’t sneeze,” he said.

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New York offered Dr. King the friendly pulpit of Riverside Church, and access to leaders of the anti-war movement, which became a major focus for him. The city also connected him to black entertainers like Harry Belafonte, and liberal donors who provided bail money and legal support. Dr. King wrote a column for The Amsterdam News, served as honorary chairman of the Gandhi Society for Human Rights, on East 40th Street in Manhattan, and in 1967 led a massive march from Central Park to the United Nations, where he decried what he called a racist war in Vietnam.

The images shown here date from 1957 to February 1968, when he spoke at a centennial tribute to W.E.B. DuBois. By then he was an official honorary New Yorker, with a Medallion of Honor presented to him by Mayor Robert F. Wagner. If the city was never his home, in these pictures it did its best to match the tension and monumental focus that marked his too-short life.

The images are on view from January 13th, 2018, in the exhibit "King in New York" at the Museum of the City of New York.