

Elder Bernice A. King

Living the Dream

By Mikell Worley

WHEN BERNICE KING TALKS, people can't help but listen. She has such a command of the language and uses words so powerfully, that I lost count of the number of times that I felt chills during our conversation. Hers is a legacy of ideas, translated into words that inspire action.





Elder Bernice A. King

Born on March 28, 1963, Bernice Albertine King is the second daughter and the youngest of four children of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and Coretta Scott King. Five months after Bernice King's birth, Dr. King delivered his powerful "I Have a Dream" speech on August 28, 1963. He spoke to a crowd of approximately 200,000 from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial during the March on Washington, D.C., for Jobs and Freedom. That day Dr. King called for an end to the discrimination against African Americans and Jim Crow Laws that were widespread throughout the United States.

With determined eloquence Dr. King sought to impart a sense of "the fierce urgency of Now . . . Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice . . . Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children" Yet with almost the next breath, Dr. King made a plea for a nonviolent revolution—"We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force." It was a pivotal moment in the Civil Rights Movement and for the history of the United States.

Long after his death Reverend King's words continue to inspire and impact our world through his speeches and writings. Many consider Dr. King to be one of the greatest orators of all times. Coretta Scott King carried on her husband's work for the Civil Rights Movement after his assassination on April 4, 1968, by adding her words and insights to his. Bernice King's parents were world renowned leaders, as well as great orators.

Their daughter carries on their legacy. Bernice A. King, also known as Elder King for her standing in the church, was five years old when her father was killed. Like her father, she is concerned about the next generation and she hopes to develop a nation of young people who will impact the global marketplace and transform world culture with a KINGdom mindset.

Bernice began her oratorical journey at the age of 17 when she spoke in her mother's stead and addressed the United Nations General Assembly in New York, New York. At that same age, she heard the call to ministry, but she wasn't yet ready to accept it. In 1983, at age 20, she had her first preaching assignment at St. Sabina Church in Chicago, Illinois, although she did not formally accept her call to Christian ministry until age 24 when she was licensed to preach. Her passion as well as voice inflection and mannerisms remind many of her father.

The ability to inspire people to action lifts Dr. Martin Luther King, Coretta Scott King, and Bernice King beyond mere speechmakers. Their dreams of investing in education and economic development so that everyone is free to realize their full human potential give focus to people looking for direction, and their impassioned reasoning acts as a catalyst to those that hear them. Elder King's conversation, speeches, and her sermons resonate with a call to action. The same message is interwoven throughout her book, *Hard Questions, Heart Answers* (1996).

Bernice King's commitment to her family's vision of living a life of nonviolence doesn't end at the podium. She walks the talk, and she gives credit for that to her mother. "The most valuable lessons my Mother taught me were through her actions. She didn't say one thing and do another. She was the model of forgiveness, excellence, integrity, consideration of human kind, and leading a nonviolent life. If she had not been able to forgive the man who killed my father, it would have been difficult for us to forgive as well," notes King.

"We were taught not to hate anyone. Our family was tested. My paternal grandmother was shot in 1974 while playing the organ in church when I was 11 years old. Even after that, I remember my grandfather (Daddy King) saying that he could never hate anyone, not even the man who killed his wife. Hate manifests itself in the person who is feeling it. My family gave me the frame of reference that it is healthier to forgive. It's not easy, but it is what Jesus would do."

Elder King and her mother shared a unique bond, and she says that her "favorite memories of my Mother are from the time when I was three to six years old, having her hold me in her lap and sharing Eskimo kisses, where we rubbed our noses together. As a child, I felt safe in her arms. We were constantly living under threats. I didn't know a lot about what was happening, but I was always afraid that my mother might not come back. I was always asking, "When are you coming back home?" remembers King.

"Many years later [my mother] had a stroke. It was 2005 and I was 42 years old. There was a role reversal, and now I as the child had to care for my parent. This time of care and the role reversal rekindled our expressions of love, including our Eskimo kisses. I held her in my arms, and I was with her when she died in a hospital in Mexico at age 78 on January 30, 2006. God did it that way because He knew from my childhood experiences that I wouldn't be able to handle it if I couldn't be with her when she passed."



COURTESY OF FIRST KINGDOM MANAGEMENT

Living the Dream

Elder King was the only one of the four King siblings to enter the ministry. “None of us was encouraged to be like mom or dad. ‘Just be your best self, whatever you chose,’ was my mother’s advice. She didn’t force us into one thing or another. She encouraged us to evolve into what we were to become and stood beside us to guide us. Of course there were parameters as we knew we needed to choose something that was consistent with the value systems that we were taught. I learned many lessons along the way.”

During the summer of 1972, Bernice King attended a two week summer camp in North Carolina. While there, she set a goal for herself that required a significant level of determination and commitment. “There was a swimming program with certificates for accomplishments,” remembers Elder King. “A Blue Gill had the courage to step into the water, the Trout went into deeper waters, the Bass was even more accomplished, and the ultimate challenge was the Whale, earned by swimming five laps around a lake. I was the first to attempt the Whale, and [I was] determined to finish. It seemed endless. I can still remember my sister cheering me on. I was not giving up. I was the first person to complete the challenge, at nine years old. For me, it was personally satisfying. Those around me called it ‘a triumph, groundbreaking.’”

Years later, when she was working on her five-year, joint degree program for law and divinity, Bernice remembered those five laps around the lake and the courage and perseverance it took to complete that goal. The same determination and commitment she had then resurfaced, and she knew she could conquer the joint degree program.

Her decision to enter law school was sparked by her desire to serve as an advocate for people in need. As a child, Bernice A. King found herself frequently defending herself and others. “People often said, ‘You should be a lawyer.’” When she was younger, she had been fascinated with Perry

Mason, a television show named after a caring attorney who creatively defended the rights of his clients to ensure that justice was served.

In 1985, Bernice earned a bachelor’s degree at Spelman College, a women’s liberal arts college in Atlanta, Georgia, and then enrolled in Emory University. Elder King graduated from Emory in June of 1990 with a master’s degree in divinity from the university’s Candler School of Theology and a Juris Doctor of Law from Emory University School of Law. The combined disciplines give King a unique perspective.

Self-understanding and balance are central and integral to Elder King’s philosophy. “If you want to balance it all you have to know who you are and what you value,” advises King. “My mother was a mother and a leader who founded and built the King Center, lobbied for the King Holiday, counseled government leaders . . . she did it all.

“She was able to balance because she knew her number one priority and it was unwavering – her children. She told everyone around her, ‘No matter where I am in the world, if my children need me, you find me immediately.’ I can remember a time when she was working in her office at home. I was six or seven years old and I wanted to see her, but her assistant at the time told me my mother was busy and turned me away. When my mother found out she addressed the assistant to make it very clear that, ‘My children are my first priority.’”

Elder King emphasizes that, “My point is, like my mother, we must decide what our priorities are. Make the decision and be comfortable with it.” She notes that if we have our priorities in order and are comfortable with ourselves, it reduces stress. We know who we are, and that is an added bonus when it comes to making critical decisions. “People will disagree with you, disappoint you, betray you, and turn on you. Accept it. You are free and liberated if you know yourself. If I’m going to empower others I know I can’t run myself down in the ground.”



PUBLIC DOMAIN – SIMON J. KURTZ

THE MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., CENTER FOR NONVIOLENT SOCIAL CHANGE

The Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change, located in Atlanta, Georgia, is committed to his dream of a beloved world community in which all people of all races, religions, and nations are united by a common bond of love and goodwill. We want to help prepare people to create a world without war, racism, hunger, poverty, deprivation, a world without prejudice and discrimination.

Elder King knows and is comfortable with her priorities. “Number one, I’m true to me, through my commitment to God, my health, and my ministry.” She wants all people, especially girls and other women, to possess their own self-assurance. King notes that, “There are compelling economic as well as moral reasons for more leadership development programs for girls and women. The Girl Scouts is one of the few nationwide organizations that provide leadership training for young women.”

Another organization close to her heart is the Coretta Scott King Young Women’s Leadership Academy (CSKYWLA – pronounced syc-kee-WAH-lah). Located in Atlanta, Georgia, CSKYWLA stands as a tribute to the life and legacy of Coretta Scott King.

Bernice says that, “In August 2007, I had the opportunity to deliver the Inaugural Address at the school’s opening ceremony. At the ceremony, I had the girls recite a pledge that I wrote. One of my most fulfilling moments was when the principal called to ask if the school could use the pledge for the girls to recite. From that day forward, on a daily basis the students recite this pledge of affirmation as a means to instill leadership and character development.”

CORETTA SCOTT KING YOUNG WOMEN’S LEADERSHIP ACADEMY PLEDGE

I will be on top of my game
I will stand out and not just fit in
I will be the greatest influence
I will take charge of my life
I will go for the best and not settle for less
I will step up and take my throne
I will positively pressure my peers
I will leave “common” behind
I will reject commonality
I will refuse to be ordinary
I will refuse to be regular
I will distinguish myself
I will elevate my thinking
I will set the rules
I will recreate the norm
I will devastate mediocrity
I will not cheat
I will not take short-cuts
I will make the grade
I will take responsibility for my actions
I will lead the way

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The school began with only sixth grade girls but currently accommodates sixth through eighth grade girls. By 2013, the school’s administration plans to have classes for grades sixth through twelfth.

“Take the time to know who you are,” advises King. “Be true to yourself. Look in the mirror. Know what you need. Find a balance. Lead a healthy life style. You can’t wait until you are 60 years old to exercise. You can’t wait until you are 60 years old to eat nutritious foods.”

This isn’t empty advice. Elder King makes time to integrate health into her life style. She looks forward in the future to being able to carve out time for hiking, spending time in nature, and photography. Elder King is still a gifted swimmer and at a younger age was an accomplished diver.

She also enjoys learning new things and finding ways to relax. Recently, at a King celebration in Atlanta, she met a musician who plays the harmonica. After King showed interest in learning to play the instrument, the musician reached into her purse and pulled out a new harmonica and gave it to King. She wanted to show King how to play it, so she pulled Bernice aside for a quick lesson, which proved “a great stress release!” Now she enjoys playing the harmonica.

On October 30, 2009, Elder King was elected president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Once installed, she will be the first woman to hold this position, and it is something of a family tradition. Her father served in that role, and years ago she supported her brother, Martin Luther King III, in his successful bid for that office.

Elder King is faith and reverence in action. She carries on the legacy of her parents, and yet she brings a powerful personal perspective that lifts the souls of the people who encounter her. She is a timeless, international force. Through her compassion and passion for all humanity, Bernice Albertine King will continue to inspire us to dedicate our lives to a living the dream.

She shares the same sense of urgency that her father had before her. As she notes in her book *Hard Questions, Heart Answers*, “Now is the time to move forward in a unified nonviolent coalition to fulfill the promise of democracy. Now is the time to make real the dream of freedom and justice. And now is the time to stand up for national unity, peace, and world sister and brotherhood.”

At the conclusion of his “I Have a Dream Speech,” Dr. King spoke passionately of things he dreamed of for the future. He said that, “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” It is not difficult to believe Dr. King would be well-pleased with the character of his youngest daughter, as she works tirelessly toward a more just world—a world without discrimination—a world where his dreams are reality. ❀

Mikell Worley is an artist and writer. She is the founder and president of Mikell’s Treasures. (www.mikellstreasures.com) She is the Editor-in-Chief and feature interviewer for Women-CONNECT. Mikell has illustrated several books. She is an advocate for women and children.