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### Civil Rights Champion Becomes Ambassador for Love and Hope

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# Civil Rights Champion Becomes Ambassador for Love and Hope

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Office of University Communications

January 17, 2012

Gardner-Webb University devotes a January Dimensions program each year to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s legacy of love and reconciliation. That legacy was, perhaps, never better honored at Gardner-Webb than this month, when Carolyn McKinstry, a native of Birmingham, Ala., and a veteran of that city's tumultuous Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, shared her testimony with the Gardner-Webb student body.

A lifelong member of Birmingham's Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, McKinstry was present on Sept. 15, 1963, when white racists bombed the Church, killing four of her friends. She was more than just present, in fact. McKinstry had happened to walk past the bathroom where the bomb was planted, and had even talked to her four friends just moments before they were killed.

"They were excited that morning," McKinstry remembered. "They were set to lead youth day at our church, and their lesson was going to be 'A love that forgives.' But they never had the opportunity to share that lesson."

McKinstry later survived another house bombing in her neighborhood, and says she can still hear the terrified screams of the woman in the street, wailing as she watched her house burn.

"We have talked a lot about terrorism in this nation since 9-11," McKinstry said to the Gardner-Webb students. "But terrorism was a reality for us long before 9-11. Bombing was a way of life growing up in Birmingham." McKinstry was so sure she would eventually be killed by a bomb that, she said, she had accepted the inevitability of her death even as a young teenager. When she did not, in fact, end up dying like her friends, she even struggled with a sense of depression and survivor's guilt for more than 20 years after leaving Birmingham to attend college.

But even despite the fear and uncertainty of her childhood, McKinstry also found herself on the very cusp of a movement that would rattle the racist strongholds of the South and reclaim the spirit of freedom on which the entire nation was built.



“I just happened to be at church the night that Dr. King and five other reverends and Civil Rights leaders led their first mass rally at Sixteenth Street,” she remembered. “I had never experienced someone telling us, especially us young people, that we could make a difference. Dr. King told us that night that, if we could not protect the integrity of the movement—that if we could not be nonviolent—that we should find some other way to make ourselves useful. But for those of us who would march with him, he said we would know the signal when we saw it.”

That signal came the very next day, when mobilizers arrived at McKinstry’s school with a sign emblazoned with a simple and yet profound message: “It’s time.” McKinstry was among the thousands of students hosed by firemen during those 1963 marches, but rather than give herself over to the fear and anger that those experiences birthed in her, the placard she carried has continued to define her life’s ministry even to this day.

“My sign asked a simple question, based on the passage in 1 John 4: ‘Can a man love God and hate his brother,’” McKinstry said. “I don’t believe he can.” Calling herself a “child of the movement,” McKinstry believes God delivered her from all those experiences to share a simple but powerful message of hope, love, and reconciliation.

“We have to reconcile ourselves to God, by assuring that nothing in our lives runs contrary to his Word. By doing that, we can begin to hope for true reconciliation with one another. That’s how we can achieve that beloved community that Dr. King preached so passionately about.”

McKinstry has shared her story with numerous national and international media outlets, including the History and Discovery Channels, CNN, BBC, MSNBC, Life Magazine, and the Oprah Winfrey Show. She also serves as President of the Board of Directors of the Sixteenth Street Foundation, Inc., and has served as Second Vice President and Program Committee Chair for the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute.

But perhaps the most fitting symbol of McKinstry’s legacy is her recent appointment to a committee commissioned to review and rewrite the Alabama state constitution to protect the freedom, integrity, and equality of all of Alabama’s citizens. When driving toward Birmingham for that important work, her route takes her right through her hometown, where she says she was born in the house of her grandparents because hospitals would not admit black patients or facilitate black childbirth.

“Who would have thought,” McKinstry said with a smile, “that only decades after I was born in a small house, because black citizens weren’t allowed in the hospitals, that I would pass back through that same town on my way to helping rewrite the state’s Constitution. Certain doors open in such a way that we know only God could have opened them.”

McKinstry's life has been a testament to that process of love and restoration, a process she challenged Gardner-Webb students to pursue for themselves. "I'm an ambassador for reconciliation all over the world. That's what God has called me to do. But no matter what your individual calling is, you can be an ambassador for reconciliation right here, where you are. I hope you'll join me in that effort."

*Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University seeks a higher ground in higher education – one that embraces faith and intellectual freedom, balances conviction with compassion, and inspires in students a love of learning, service, and leadership.*



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