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Martin Luther King Jr.
& the Civil Rights Movement

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Streets and dreams: Martin Luther King Jr. roadways

By Jerry Large
Times Staff Columnist

I was driving through South Florida a couple of years ago, headed toward a resort island where I planned to meet my family. I'd just spent a week in a seminar and I wanted to do some laundry before I got to the island, but I was unfamiliar with the cities through which the highway passed.

Eventually I came across a Martin Luther King Jr. exit, so I took it. I knew it would lead to a poor neighborhood and that there would be plenty of Laundromats. I was right on both counts.

King is memorialized in streets, boulevards and avenues from Seattle to Miami, and most of them run through pockets of poverty and segregation of the sort he fought so hard to eradicate.

Often naming any street for him was in itself a struggle.

He is a national figure, but many cities where black people are scarce had little support for putting his name on an avenue. Boise and Bismarck, Spokane and Salt Lake City don't have one.

Change can be an inconvenience. Sometimes it challenges our view of the world and of ourselves, and sometimes it just means a little extra work - changing business stationery or redoing a sign.

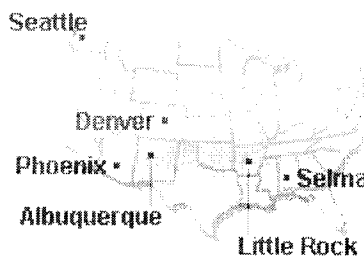
Business owners along a renamed stretch of Grand Avenue in Albuquerque said the new name was just too cumbersome.

It is a mouthful: Martin Luther King Jr. Way South. That's why people say "over on MLK," or "go down King" - it's easier, and most people quite naturally want to do the easy thing.

King, however, walked a hard road, uphill against convention, over hostility and through indifference.

"The ultimate measure of a man," King once said, "is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at a time of challenge and controversy. The true neighbor will risk his position and even his life for the welfare of others."

That quotation is one of a dozen carved onto plaques embedded in a wall at the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Park in Seattle.

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The park rises up a hillside from Martin Luther King Jr. Way South on a stretch of the road just south of the historical black center of Seattle and in the northern part of a cluster of neighborhoods that are among the most integrated in the nation, one-third Asian, one-third black, one-third white.

It is an area where one might, indeed, see the sight King dreamed of, little black girls and little white girls walking hand in hand.

Water cascades down a tall black granite sculpture into a reflecting pool. Twelve bronze plaques set into the concrete wall of the pool chronicle King's life, and 12 plaques set in the first of several walls that rise in tiers behind the sculpture contain quotations from him.

As I walk around the sculpture, along the wall, it is almost as if I were having a conversation with King.

A few blocks north of the memorial a freeway runs through a tunnel underneath MLK Way carrying people from the prosperous suburbs east of Seattle into downtown and back. They would never see MLK Way or the memorial. I was thinking about that when I read the first plaque.

"All too many of those who live in affluent America ignore those who exist in poor America. To ignore evil is to become an accomplice to it."

As I walked along the wall, I lost the sound of cars on MLK Way and was soothed instead by the constancy of falling water. Pleasantness, not struggle, is what most of us want. I read another plaque.

"An individual has not started to live until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of humanity."

We think of resistance to civil rights coming from the South in the form of portly sheriffs with snarling dogs, but one of the plaques notes that King was stoned when he led a peaceful march through a white neighborhood in Chicago as part of an open-housing drive there.

Open-housing efforts did not go down easily in Seattle, either.

We get complacent sometimes. We are nice people and rarely is there a march now.

"True peace is not merely the absence of tensions: It is the presence of justice."

The eight miles of Martin Luther King Jr. Way run north and south. The street never leaves the more integrated parts of Seattle.

It stops a mile and a half short of the Lake Washington Ship Canal, which is a physical and psychological divider, the entrance to the mostly white North End. It ends just before the high-income gated community called Broadmoor.

At its other end, the name changes as it passes through a no-man's land of barren hillsides and heads off into the suburbs.

It might be nice to have a street named for him in one of those homogenous suburbs where a child might ask her parent who this King person was.

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He's a guy who became a symbol because he preached peace and nonviolence to black people eager for a bigger role in American society.

He is a guy often quoted by opponents of affirmative action who cite that part of his "I have a dream" speech that yearns for a society in which his four children would not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.

They do not quote from other sections of the speech, such as this one: "America has given the Negro people a bad check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds.'"

Some people like him because he said love those who persecute you, not because he demanded remedies for racial and economic injustice.

I think he would be pleased that streets named for him run past the homes of poor people and black people. I think he would be disappointed that those streets rarely reach across lines that still exist between rich and poor, black and white.

But he would not be surprised that there still is work to be done.

He would not be pleased by blacks killing blacks, by black wrongdoers using blackness as a shield, by hate crimes and educational inequality.

He would be saddened that we seem to prefer prisons to schools, but uplifted by those people who are committed to helping others.

He would rejoice in America's increased diversity, but would be concerned that some newer Americans might see the land of opportunity and miss the land of obligation.

There is still work to be done.

On one of those plaques, he said, "One of the most agonizing problems within our human experience is that few, if any, of us live to see our fondest hopes fulfilled . . ."

The work that is left is for us to do, and there's plenty to go around.

Today, we are going to visit a few of the streets named for King and see whether their stories speak as clearly as those plaques, see what they have to teach us about the road ahead.

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Seattle: Martin Luther King Way is growing into its name

By Ferdinand M. de Leon
Seattle Times staff reporter

Fifteen years ago, when the time came for Seattle to honor the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Karen Yoshihara had doubts about the chosen road: a no-nonsense eight-mile stretch that offered a straight shot through impoverished neighborhoods, a fading business district and a warehouse-lined industrial area.

Unlike the merchants who complained about the cost of changing their addresses, Yoshihara had another objection: She thought the road wasn't good enough for the man being honored.

"At the time I thought there might have been a more appropriate stretch of road," said Yoshihara, 55, who has lived near King Way since 1972. "It's not exactly the most beautiful street. It just didn't seem a fitting memorial."

Today, Yoshihara says she was wrong.

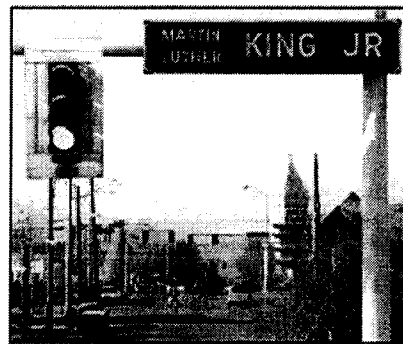
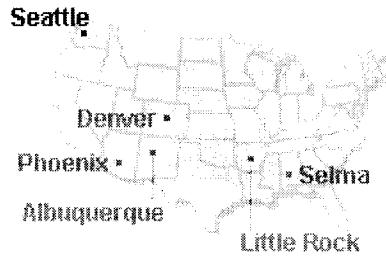
Over the years, as she has seen the street transformed, she has had a change of heart.

"Maybe Dr. King would have been proud," said Yoshihara while stopping at a doughnut shop near the Martin Luther King Jr. Market, where she works as a checker. "Now, I can't imagine it being called anything but Martin Luther King Way."

Named after a man whose primary legacy was his vision for a better future, the street itself seemed for years to have no future. Its houses were dilapidated, businesses were closing, and fear of crime - real and perceived - kept many people away.

Now, along this once-troubled thoroughfare that traverses the city's southeast side, there is a new optimism.

Houses long left in disrepair are being renovated. Blocks pockmarked by abandoned lots have begun to fill in. A wave of Southeast Asian-owned businesses has led the street's commercial revitalization. And even Holly Park and Rainier Vista, two of the city's largest public-housing projects, have had



Tom Reese © The Seattle Times
A view from Seattle's Martin Luther King Jr. Way includes the Olympic Mountains and Smith Tower.

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Martin Luther King Jr. Way is growing into its name.

"This is a prime location right now," said LaVonne Beaver, 30. For 38 years, Beaver's family has published *The Facts*, a neighborhood weekly based in the strip's north end. "In the past 10 years, it has really become more of a multi-ethnic community."

In some ways, the road chosen to honor King mirrors the course of the movement that he championed.

Like the civil-rights campaign, the road begins modestly (a two-lane residential street), quickly gains force as it courses its way south (where it becomes a state highway), feeds into a national network (the interstate) and then disappears into the suburbs.

It's an unpredictable, eclectic path. Dilapidated houses stand next to newly renovated ones, storefront churches thrive near Buddhist temples and mini-malls near housing projects. On Martin Luther King Jr. Way, you can find a blood-donor center urging donors to bring a friend, a Vietnamese restaurant serving only soup, a Filipino grocery/video store, a barbecue shack and a car-part junkyard - all within miles of one another.

Roughly the northern third of the street is residential, cutting through the heart of the city's African-American neighborhoods. In the past decade, there has been an influx of new white and Asian-American residents, drawn by the area's affordability and its proximity to downtown.

It was optimism about the area that convinced Tedla Dessalene, an Ethiopian refugee, to risk starting his own business on King Way.

A tall, soft-spoken man, Dessalene, 38, opened Abyssinia Grocery four years ago with the savings he had amassed from years of working 80-hour weeks on three or four jobs, first in Washington, D.C., and then in Seattle.

The store is not much larger than an espresso shack, but it offers an eclectic range of goods - everything from cold beers to a wide selection of Ethiopian foods and spices. His 27-year-old wife takes over for him in the afternoons, and he heads to his other job as a parking-lot manager, working until midnight.

But the sacrifices are worth it, he said. The house he bought for \$90,000 near the grocery store is now worth \$150,000. He and his wife also have a house in north Shoreline, and he's talking about starting another business.

There are now at least a half-dozen other Ethiopians, men who came to this country with little or nothing, who have started grocery stores on the street, he said.

Having his first business on a street named after the civil-rights leader holds special significance for Dessalene. He remembers first hearing about King when he was a high school student in Ethiopia. Later, when he came to the United States as a refugee from his war-torn country, he sought to learn more about King and the fight for civil rights.

"Without that time, we would not have the freedom we have today," he said. "It's hard enough to live in this country, especially for Africans, but he helped

to make our lives better."

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Further south on King Way, Steve Choi, a 50-year-old Korean-American businessman, also feels optimistic about the long-term prospects of his recently relocated and expanded clothing store, Funky Town.

Outside, large, eye-catching signs proclaim the store's recent grand opening and bargains on its urban hip-hop wear, the store's specialty.

Choi said Korean immigrants are also becoming established on King Way. He names an array of businesses near his store, all owned by fellow Korean Americans.

But not everyone is pleased with the developments on King Way.

George Noble, owner of Green Stone Properties, a real-estate agency based on King Way, said that when he started his business in 1984, the area was roughly 70 percent black, 20 percent white and 10 percent Asian. Now Asians make up about 30 to 40 percent of property owners, and blacks just 50 percent.

"I don't sell that many properties on this street to African Americans now," said Noble, who is black. "Most of my clients are Asians."

As Martin Luther King Jr. Way has been revitalized, so have property values. Many African Americans are leaving, moving to southern suburbs like Renton or Kent, where they can buy bigger houses for less money, Noble said.

"The price of property here is going up and up," Noble said. "It used to be possible to buy \$8,000 lots; not anymore." A property just off the strip that he sold for \$119,000 just two years ago now commands a \$149,000 price.

Although he likes the revitalization of Martin Luther King Jr. Way, Noble believes African Americans are mostly being left out.

"Most of the businesses here are owned by Southeast Asians," he said. "Where are the African-American businesses? I believe it's an honor to have a business on Martin Luther King Jr. Way. It's just a shame that not more African Americans have businesses here."

And despite its progress, King Way still isn't entirely free of the problems that, in the past, fueled its reputation as an unsafe street.

Bill Mizuki, the 69-year-old owner of Mizuki Nursery, a staple on the street since 1955, said his cash register was cleaned out twice last year by men who had pretended to be customers.

Since the thefts, Mizuki brings in his dog, a Lab-Akita mix, for added security. But although he has had offers on the property, he plans to stay put.

Even though Martin Luther King Jr. Way still is struggling to grow into the lofty promise of its name, most of the time the fit feels just right.

Before it was Martin Luther King Jr. Way, the street was called Empire Way. Today, only a handful of businesses hint at the street's past.

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When the name change was proposed, there was such strong opposition that a group of merchants filed suit, taking their case all the way to the state Supreme Court, where they lost.

At the front of the Empire Way Tavern, on the corner of Orcas, the old street signs still hang on the side of the building, a lingering protest to unwelcome change. The owners of the tavern were outspoken critics of the change. But although the tavern has different ownership, the name has remained.

Inside, the tavern hasn't changed much over the years, either, said Ricardo Ramacho, who took over the bar four years ago. It continues to draw the same crowd, mostly white men, who live and work in the area, Ramacho said.

"I thought they could have left the name as it was," said Ramacho, 36. "I've been coming in here since I was 21. People still call it the Empire Way anyway."

But, in hindsight, it's clear that Empire Way, a grand, anachronistic appellation left over from a more brash age, was doomed.

That King, a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize and a proponent of non-violent change, would supplant that relic of an imperialist America is a rich irony that now seems inevitable. After all, all empires rise and fall.

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Little Rock: MLK Drive links the capital city to a community and a people to their past

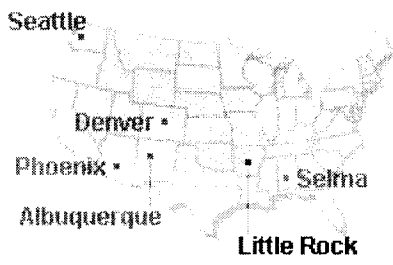
**By Tim Stanley
Arkansas Democrat-Gazette**

If the measure of a man and his legacy are worth preserving, then perhaps the at-first-glance passe tradition of street dedication is a useful method for doing so. Caesar comes, he conquers, we hang his name on Avenue B and surmise that somewhere down the line someone will read it and reflect on past glories. If the measure of a man and his legacy are worth preserving, then perhaps the at-first-glance passe tradition of street dedication is a useful method for doing so. Caesar comes, he conquers, we hang his name on Avenue B and surmise that somewhere down the line someone will read it and reflect on past glories. Or past dreams.

To find a street in this country bearing the name of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., who was born Jan. 15, 1929, in Atlanta and murdered at the age of 39 on April 4, 1968, in Memphis, is no difficult task.

They are sprinkled all over the South beyond, and honor the memory of the powerful proponent of nonviolent protest by their sheer and unrivaled ubiquity. Little Rock is no exception with its own drive so dubbed, forming an unmistakable seam in the city's sprawling network of asphalt. Finger it on the map and you will trace a course that begins under the gleam of the Capitol dome, cuts across Interstate 630 and then south for some 2 1/2 miles to in a flurry of residential streets.

The route itself is checkered with a literal gallery of town and country "muralesques": Uncle T's Food Mart, with its 99-cent chili dogs; Carpenter's Produce with its greens and things arranged open-air style; Yancey's Cafeteria, "50 years established" and still providing "home-cooked food"; and the churches, like The Greater Rose of Sharon Missionary Baptist Church with Reverend Blood, and just down the way, The Prayer Tabernacle. All of these contribute to the drive a landscape rich in character and local color.



© Rick McFarland

Martin Luther King Drive in Little Rock begins under the gleam of the Capitol dome, cuts across Interstate 630 and then south for 2-1/2 miles.

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Formerly known as High Street, the thoroughfare has claimed its current title since 1992, when after years of surveys and petition drives, the street was finally



and ceremoniously dedicated to King. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Drive has since become hub to a galaxy of activity; parades and community events have brought thousands to toe its margins and in so doing pay a collective homage to the man who, in the minds of many, best symbolizes the solidarity of his people.

Formerly known as High Street, the thoroughfare has claimed its current title since 1992, when after much effort and years of surveys and petition drives, the street was finally and ceremoniously dedicated to King. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Drive has since become hub to a galaxy of activity; parades and community events have brought thousands to toe its margins and in so doing pay a collective homage to the man who, in the minds of many, best symbolizes the solidarity of his people.

But if the spirit of King lives on now, some 30 years after his death, it is embodied in forces that are massing on new fronts, a new march for a cause more desperate in its urgency. Martin Luther King Jr. Interdistrict Magnet Elementary School sits just off the drive, and mere blocks from where children meander in and out of its red-brick halls stand the memorials; intimations of a cheap mortality. In a grassy lot, a sign created by Little Rock activist Robert "Say" McIntosh stands erect and conspicuous. It reads all: "Since 1992 to 4/1/96 209 Blacks have been murdered by Blacks in Little Rock alone, by Blacks only because of the color of their skin, Black..." From the same lot, and echoing the former, another sign declares, "Black on Black crime is a disgrace to God and mankind."

These tokens of shame and tragedy are bolstered by a number of faith-inspired calls to disarm: "God is going to have the last word," inscribed on a couple of signs, rings with impending finality; in turn, a corner telephone pole brandishes the sixth commandment, "Thou Shalt Not Kill;" another sign advises that "Jesus is coming soon ... Are you ready?"

All along the drive and its environs are scattered similar entreaties; admonitions of peace in places where fast guns and sidelong glances have fragmented the hopes and dreams of a community. Down the street a hair salon recycles the motif, its side adorned with the pastel plea: "Stop the Violence ... Before it Stops You." The visage of King himself is there as well, gracing a small banner suspended from a street lamp. But to the casual observer, this face that ripples in the least of breezes seems somehow aloof, itself a mere observer from its lofty point of vantage. A short slogan punctuates it: "Living the Dream ... in Arkansas."

Such reminders are timely. For if there is anything in a name, if any residue of the past remains in the real faces and in the halls of schools like Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary, then maybe future tragedies can be averted. But for now there is Martin Luther King Jr. Day on Monday, Jan. 19, and a street.

Before this street, however, there were many streets, where the will and heels of many trod down the age-old dragons of fear and oppression. Perhaps into Martin Luther King Jr. Drive all of these streets have merged, and so too the men and women who marched them. If history is any indicator, it is just such a

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unity, a oneness of purpose, that will gain the freedom sought. And so just as Martin Luther King Jr. Drive links the capitol city to a community and a people to their past, maybe it is yet to serve its greatest purpose - as the bridge to a brighter, more promising future.

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Selma: Martin Luther King Street is also the location of the First Baptist Church, where King frequently spoke

By Robyn Harris
Selma Times-Journal

SELMA, Ala. - In 1976, Sylvan Street was changed to M.L. King Street by a 6-5 vote of the Selma City Council.

Of the six who voted for the change, two were white, including current Council President Carl Morgan Jr. Morgan was also council president during the 1965 civil rights marches that brought international attention to this city of 25,000.

Morgan doesn't recall much controversy over the renaming; the main concerns came from the small businesses that had to change their addresses.

Councilwoman Jean Martin said the renaming was an important step in the history of the city. Sylvan was one of the town's original streets, but Martin said it was important to honor King, who spent many nights along Sylvan working for civil rights during the 1960s.

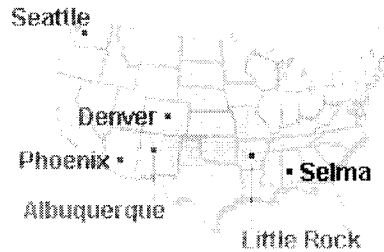
Martin is also the curator of the Old Depot Museum on M.L. King Street. She notes the street was the beginning of the route from historic Brown Chapel to the Edmund Pettus Bridge, site of the infamous Bloody Sunday march on Selma to the state Capitol building 50 miles away in Montgomery, which was led by King. Last year, Congress named the route a National Historic Trail and the U.S. Department of Transportation made it an All-American Highway.

Martin Luther King Street is also the location of the First Baptist Church, where King frequently spoke at the height of the voting rights struggle, and which was considered the financial headquarters for the movement in Selma.

The street is about a mile and a half in length and includes other smaller new churches like Freewill Gospel Church and Grace Temple. Most of the smaller businesses have either closed, been torn down or moved to new locations since the 1960s, but Selma Machine Shop and Holley Farm and Garden Supply remain from the Sylvan Street era.

Brown Chapel is located in the middle of Selma's first public housing complex, George Washington Carver Homes, which was frequently photographed in the 1960s demonstrations and provided the backdrop for a famous Time magazine photograph of King just before the Selma-to-Montgomery march.

There are mostly older homes along the street now, the vast majority of them owned by older African-American families.



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There is some irony here, too, which perhaps exists nowhere else in the U.S.

At one point in its route, Martin Luther King Street intersects with Jefferson Davis Avenue. During the Civil War, Davis was the president of the Confederacy.

In the 1860s, Sylvan Street was home to the Confederate National Naval Ordnance Works, where the Brooke Canon and several ironclad ships were built. The last remaining section of the war factory today is undergoing renovations as a tourist attraction. For several years, Selma's Chamber of Commerce has promoted the city's place in civil rights and Civil War History.

After crossing Jeff Davis Avenue, M.L. King Street passes through one of Selma's poorest residential sections before running again through a section of middle-class family homes.

The city has made sections of the street part of its "walking tour" of civil-rights-era sites designated by large markers that tell the story of the people and events that helped bring about equal rights for all Americans.

With a monument honoring Dr. King in front of Brown Chapel, those who live on the street or just come to visit are reminded of his tireless efforts to keep the dream alive.

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Albuquerque: City buses wail up and down Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue

By Ollie Reed Jr.
Albuquerque Tribune

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. - Albuquerque's Martin Luther King Jr. memorial, an oasis of grass, art and inspiration wrapped in concrete, asphalt and downtown traffic noise, is aptly enough a reminder that most change comes with struggle.

In 1994, then-Mayor Martin Chavez proposed pumping up the city's tribute to King by changing a section of Grand Avenue between Broadway and University boulevards Northeast to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue. The move would incorporate the brief span of King Boulevard and add 14 blocks that connect the heart of Albuquerque's business and government district to the University of New Mexico campus.

Albuquerque was divided.

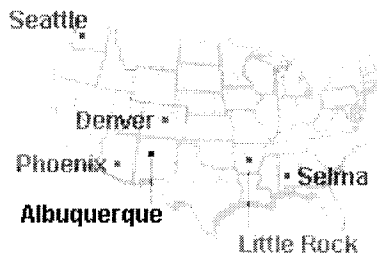
The proposal drew support from members of Albuquerque's small black community, which is about 5 percent of the city population. They thought that the original, two-block boulevard was not fitting enough testimony to the memory of the late civil rights leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner.

Those opposed to the change included people who lived along or near the affected part of Grand and those who had businesses on the street.

"Our objections had nothing to do with Martin Luther King Jr., the man," said Ruth Koury, vice president of the Sycamore Neighborhood Association, an alliance of people living just south of Grand Avenue. "It goes back to 1880 something, long before statehood. It was part of the scene when Albuquerque was very small. It grew up with the city and the state.

Koury said no one who lived or worked on or near the street supported the change. But Chavez's proposal prevailed.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Ave. is the longest street name in Albuquerque, officials at City Hall say.



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Amanda Golcher started her deli business in Albuquerque just months before the street name was changed from Grand to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue. She altered the address on her checks but has not changed it on the building that houses her small restaurant.

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City buses wail up and down it. People jog on it, walk dogs on it, ride bicycles up and down it. Homeless people panhandle on the freeway offramps emptying onto it, and ambulances whip into St. Joseph Medical Center off it.

From University Boulevard to Interstate 25, there are mostly apartments occupied by university students, young couples and senior citizens. From I-25 to Broadway, there are medical offices, the sprawling St. Joseph complex and Longfellow Elementary School.

On some buildings the old addresses remain: 1616 Grand, 1620 Grand, 1418 Grand.

That last address is above the door of DG's Deli and Market, a business located in a building that was for many years the Campus Market, a grocery serving the University Area.

Amanda Golcher, 30, started her deli business just months before the street name was changed. She altered the address on her bank checks but has not bothered to change it on the building that houses her small restaurant.

"To many people it's still Grand," Golcher said. "It's just not an issue."

Nowhere is the diverse nature of the avenue's daytime traffic more apparent than at DG's during lunchtime.

Between 11 a.m. and 2 p.m., the cafe welcomes students; nurses, staff members and surgeons from St. Joe's; residents of a nearby retirement center; professionals from downtown; and car dealers from Lomas Boulevard.

Albuquerque Grand Senior Style Apartments, formerly the College Inn, a dormitory serving UNM students, now serves as an independent-living and assisted-living facility for elderly persons. It was named for its location on Grand Avenue.

It did not change its name when the street did.

"Well, Grand means good," said Richard Pangborn, Albuquerque Grand manager since February 1997. "It's lost its pun since the name of the street has changed, but Grand is still appropriate for us because we feel we have a good facility."

Mary Catherine Kavanaugh, 88, an Albuquerque resident since 1920 and a resident of the Albuquerque Grand for two years, remembers Grand Avenue when most of the residences in the area were private homes rather than the apartments that line a good chunk of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue now.

Today, only one of those Grand Avenue private homes Kavanaugh remembers from her youth remains. It's the only single-family residence on the mile-long stretch of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue. Christina Alison and her husband, Eduardo Rodriguez, live in the two-bedroom adobe and tile house just west of University Boulevard.

Alison's grandparents, Dr. and Mrs. John Alison Jr., bought the house in 1946. Alison moved into the house with her grandmother eight years ago.

Alison fought against the new street name on behalf of her grandmother, who dreaded seeing such a change after living nearly 50 years on Grand Avenue.

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"It was not a racist thing," Alison said. "To have your street pulled out from under you, to have someone come in and say we are changing the name of your street is kind of disconcerting." Alison's grandmother died two years ago, after her street's name was changed, after her old neighbors' houses were scheduled for demolition.

"She told me it was her time to go because her world was changing too much," Alison said.

N.D. Smith, a Baptist minister who "raised hell" about the abbreviated homage of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, is happy with the tribute of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue.

"I would have preferred a street that runs through where you find a lot of blacks in the South Valley area," Smith said. "But I thought (the Grand Avenue change) was a good move by Marty (Chavez). It leads up to a major university. It's a good neighborhood. It's got much more visibility."

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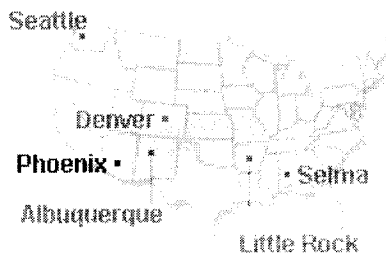
Guestbook

Perspectives | Roadways Across America

Phoenix: Martin Luther King Circle is so small, it isn't on all the city maps

By Maureen West
The Arizona Republic

PHOENIX - Her little house faces the Arizona sunset, and orange afternoon light illuminates hundreds of photos and clippings on her living-room wall. Nestled among the family and friends is the smiling face of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.



Mary Cook, 97 years old and not as many pounds, sits quietly looking out her screen door onto the city's Martin Luther King Circle, the six-house cul-de-sac that is the street in Phoenix named after the civil-rights leader.

Martin Luther King Circle is so small it isn't on all the maps of the city, though the holiday itself is - although that happened only after a protracted, nationally publicized fight.

Marches in the late 1980s to win approval for a King holiday in Arizona passed just two blocks away from Cook's door on Washington Street. After then-Arizona Gov. Evan Mecham repealed the then brand-new Martin Luther King holiday in 1987, thousands of people from all races marched on MLK's birthday every year until their persistence helped reinstall MLK Day as a state holiday.

Things have settled down a bit since, but efforts to get a major street named for King never succeeded.

Attempts in 1989 and 1990 to rename Buckeye Road, an east-west route through the center of Phoenix, fell flat. About 2,500 signatures were gathered, but black activists couldn't get support from Phoenix City Council members.

Over the years, Phoenix civil-rights activists have learned to look for modest victories.

Back in 1975, one of Mary Cook's neighbors, a teacher's aide named Shirley Johnson, nudged the city to rename the modest circle of six homes for her hero, Martin Luther King. Johnson's son, Reginald, who still lives on the street,



Mona Reeder

Mary Cook, 97, is one of the original residents on Martin Luther King Circle in Phoenix, a small six-house cul-de-sac that once was known as 11th Place or Circle.

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says it was one of his mother's proudest moments before she died in 1985.

Cook had lived in a small house near the Phoenix airport, but when that neighborhood was cleared for an industrial park, she moved to her present street, originally named 11th Circle or 11th Place - nobody remembers for sure.

In the 25 years she's been there, she's seen the other original five owners die or move away. One of the houses at the center of the cul-de-sac was a drug house; a murdered man was found there two years ago. Now there's a new group of neighbors, including the first non-black owners on the street, a Hispanic family. Things seem to be on the upswing.

Several monuments and plaques around the city honor King, including an elementary school, which former longtime City Councilman Calvin Goode considers the best type of tribute to King. "Better than a street," he said.

But don't tell that to Cook.

"I didn't cry when Martin Luther King Jr. died," she said. "I said to myself that he was God's child and he brought God's light to us. He wouldn't have died unless God was ready to have him back."

Years ago, Cook and her husband worked the fields of Arizona, California and Mexico. He died of a heart attack driving his truck along the fields of Bakersfield, Calif.

Her left foot, crushed decades ago under the steel avalanche of a capsizing potato harvester, still hurts a bit and gets a gentle massage from her tiny hand.

An inexperienced driver made too sharp a turn and the machine pitched forward on the workers, leaving them pinned in the mud. The driver, who was white, ran off and left the black and Mexican workers in the darkening field. A farmer eventually heard their cries. They were disentangled and taken to a rural hospital.

Three months later, Cook was using a crutch and back picking cotton.

These days, most of Cook's hearing is gone. Her left eye doesn't work anymore. But no matter.

Mary Cook, farm worker, granddaughter of a slave, does not live in a shack by the river bottom as a woman of modest means may have in the past.

She has a fine house on Martin Luther King Circle and she lives in the dignity that King's work helped make possible.

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Denver: Like the man it is named for, the boulevard is about people in their myriad connections

By William Porter
Denver Post Staff Writer

Eighteen years ago this month, Denver took a broad, four-mile stretch of pavement - pragmatically if unpoetically dubbed 31st Avenue - and renamed it Martin Luther King Boulevard.

For most of the year, a street named after the civil rights leader might not register that much with the people who drive and live along it, no matter how dedicated they are to the man's vision.

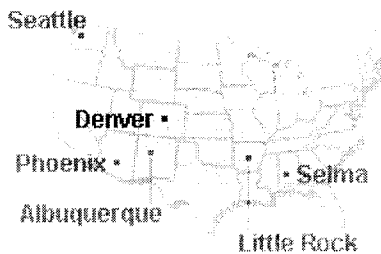
But at a time when Denver is coming off a string of hate crimes - a handful of murders and assaults perpetrated by skinheads in late autumn - a street named after a slain, Nobel Peace Prize-winner takes on added resonance.

"To have that street renamed for Martin Luther King, I think that speaks volumes about the community and how it felt about the process of change," says the Rev. Ralph Beechum, pastor of the House of Joy Miracle Deliverance Church, which sits beside the boulevard. "MLK brought on a cultural revolution that is still going on."

The boulevard is almost entirely given over to residential homes, rather wilted at the western end closest to the downtown, but modest and well-kept in the broad swath to the east, where the road is split by a grassy median.

More than a dozen churches are scattered along the boulevard. They range from storefront congregations to sprawling complexes. The Clayton Center for Children and Youth sits on the old Clayton College campus at Colorado Boulevard; it is one of a handful of community outreach organizations on the boulevard.

Most commercial activity is clustered near the road's terminus at Stapleton International Airport, which is being converted to an industrial park now that Denver International Airport has opened east of the city. Community leaders wonder if they'll see any economic benefits. "We're not worried about property values declining, but we do wonder if we'll see an enhancement," Beechum



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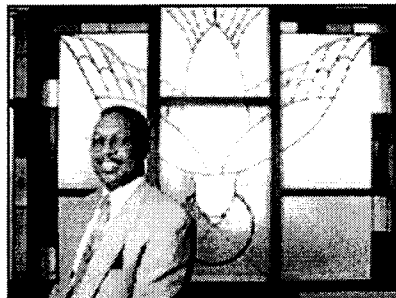
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Pastor Ralph Beechum's church borders Martin Luther King Boulevard. He believes King "brought on a cultural revolution that is still going on."

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says. "Will they remain stable or really take off?"

Like the man it is named after, the boulevard is about people in their myriad connections: individuals, families, community.

"From our perspective, having a boulevard named after Dr. King is quite important," says the Rev. Terrance Carroll, youth pastor at the 1,800-member Macedonia Baptist Church. "At least in a symbolic way it shows Denver's cognizance of his contribution."

Macedonia sits at the corner of Adams Street, close to the boulevard's midpoint. "That means quite a bit to us, because we pride ourselves on being on the cutting edge of history in our community as far as effecting social change," Carroll says. And having a street named after King is a good way to keep the man's name in front of up-and-coming generations, for whom the 1960s are something encountered in history books or grainy TV footage.

On a recent afternoon, Dejon Metters sat at a bus stop on MLK Boulevard and pondered the looming holiday's meaning. At 16, he is much too young for memories of the civil-rights leader.

But Metters appreciates King's legacy, thanks in part to his father, who owns a sense of history and has tried to impart it to his son.

"The day means freedom to me," he says. "It stands for all the things the black people went through, the slavery and everything. And it makes me think of all the things I can do now that my ancestors couldn't do, like get an education."

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