

## LOCAL ACTIVIST GRABBED THE ATTENTION OF MLK

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Human rights activist **Hector Black** looks out over his family's Hidden Springs Nursery tucked away in a valley north of Cookeville. Herald-Citizen Photo/Daniel Flatt

**PUTNAM COUNTY** -- Walking under fruit trees in his organic nursery in a deep, pristine valley north of Cookeville, Hector Black smiles as he recollects the experience in February 1966 that placed **Coretta Scott King** and her husband **Martin Luther King Jr.** outside an Atlanta jail protesting his arrest. And according to the 84-year-old white male from Queens,

his association with the famous Kings of the civil rights movement pushed the life-long human rights activist even more to seek positive change in the world.

However impacted the brush with the Kings was for him, Black's quest as a peaceful mover and shaker started long before that fateful day in Atlanta. Black's story began after his first year of college when he was drafted into the Army during World War II. There he said he faced the reality of war placing him in front of another human being instead of a lifeless target. Led by his feelings, he was able to convince doctors that he couldn't go into combat and was able to spend his two and a half year stay off of the battlefield. When his stint was over, he went back to school, attending Harvard to study social anthropology.

"I was on this crusade to save the world," Black said of his motivation behind his degree. "I was trying to figure out through social anthropology how different societies solved their problems, be it crime or old age and poverty and whatever." And with what he learned, Black entered the trenches of his own kind of war: Making peace in the world. Upon graduation, Black found himself in Belgium working for the Quakers in a mining town, trying to improve living conditions for the local miners. After his stint there, he traveled to Scotland, bought a bike and peddled around Europe looking for places and people who needed his help. "I did all kinds of different stuff. Lordy," Black said about his travels and various jobs along the way that had him working in the likes of monasteries, orphanages and Jewish communes.

Then after living in South America with a pacifist group known as a Bruderhof, he met **his wife Susie**. She and Black moved back to his home state where they stayed with a local Bruderhof in New York. It was in the community there that Black caught wind of his next and biggest social undertaking. "(Civil rights activist) **Fannie Lou Hamer** spoke at the community," Black said. "And I thought (the movement) was the most positive thing happening in the county. So we got in this little travel trailer and headed south. The center of all of the civil rights organizations was in Atlanta. So I parked the trailer in the trailer park and drove into the town and tried to look for work with one of the organizations."

Black found work with an inner city tutoring program run by the Quakers, and ever wanting to immerse himself into his work, he found a house in a run-down, black neighborhood. "I look back on it and I think this must be very weird of me that (our first place there) wasn't poor enough for me," he said.

"So I moved down into Magnolia Avenue into one of the really crumbling houses. I felt like if I lived there, I'd be able to understand much more." Consequently, he did, and his experiences mixing with the locals lead him to expand his work from education to the larger problem inside the students' homes. Black learned that much of the students' problems stemmed from their living conditions, so he starting helping the locals with their housing and neighborhood problems. Then in February of 1966, a woman came to him about a slum called the Marcum Hotel. "It was one of the worst buildings, and people in the neighborhood knew

that we were interested in trying to better conditions," Black said of the run down hotel. The woman walked Black into the two-story building that held 16 rooms, and he was immediately struck by the nasty living conditions.

"She took me into one of the rooms, and it's all black from soot," he recalled. "A little stove was the only heat, a coal stove. It was winter and quite cold. The family was all huddled around the stove, and there was just one bed that everybody slept in. It was just awful looking. I wouldn't have put a cow in a place like that. These were human beings, families, kids living in these conditions, so I was really angry." Black got together with his colleagues, and they organized a rent strike outside of the owner's home to try to force the landlord to improve the conditions of the hotel. On his way to picket, Black passed the landlord, who knew of Black's intentions. "He called the police, and so when I got to the house, a policeman said, 'If you take one step up there, I'm going to have to arrest you.' And I said, 'Hold it here for a minute,' and I went and told a friend what was happening."

Black came back, placed a foot on the steps in front of the cop and was handcuffed and taken to the local courthouse to be booked for jail time. "We were all chained together and loading on a bus to go to the county jail, and as I was being loaded onto the bus, I looked over and I saw some of the black leaders of Atlanta. I guess my friend had notified them of what had happened, and they were there just to see what was going on." One of those black leaders was **Martin Luther King Jr.**

While Black spent his 36 hours in the county jail, Martin Luther and Coretta, along with other activists, picketed Black's arrest. The Kings and other protesters carried signs reading "Free Black" as they marched around the county jail. Coretta, who knew Black from Quaker meetings, later brought his family dinner the night Black stayed in jail. "I wasn't sure what I was going to get into, but I knew there was a lot of racism and if word got out that I was working for the rights of black people, I figured I might get beat up or something," Black said. "But nothing happened at all." Instead of violence, Black's efforts improved his report with the local community. Black stayed in the neighborhood long enough to be around for two and a half years, where he spent much of his time speaking to local organizations about his experiences and protesting for change.

According to Black, the progress he felt he made was painstakingly small, but he kept going anyway. However small it felt to him, Black said he believes that the efforts of King and other peaceful movers of the time was a positive one -- one that continues today. "I think we're coming forward, and I think a lot of it is due to the legacy of Dr. King," Black said of his thoughts on where race relations are today. "I think one of the things that bothers me is we make kind of a saint or icon of Dr. King but don't pay attention to what he said. You put him on a postage stamp and things like that. "It's been a constant problem for me that -- and I'm no angel -- just living what you believe, making your beliefs take on a life somehow, to make your life different from what it would normally be is just very important to me. And I don't know where we would be in race relations if it hadn't been for him, because we might very well have had a violent uprising. I just felt like it would have set us back."

Black, who moved to the Upper Cumberland area decades ago, lives at his Hidden Springs Nursery. And at his age of 84, he still works for peace. He says it's what keeps him going.

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