

## HUD Black History Showcase Series

Martin Luther King, Jr.  
1929-1968

Born in Atlanta, Georgia, King was a Baptist minister and civil rights leader. As a child, King displayed an early talent as an orator and sought ways for its best use. He deliberated during his youth on his calling, ultimately deciding in his junior year at Morehouse college, to enter the ministry. He later enrolled at Crozer Theological Seminary to train for the ministry. There he met and was profoundly influenced by Modest Johnson, president of Howard University, on Indian pacifist Gandhi. King went from Crozer to Boston University as a doctoral student. There he met his wife, Coretta, who was studying voice at the New England Conservatory of Music. Following graduation from Boston College, King became pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. There he joined the supporters of Rosa Parks, a black woman who had been arrested in Montgomery for quietly refusing to give up her bus seat to a white person. King also began his relationship with Ralph Abernathy, a minister with whom he would work for the rest of his life.

In 1957, King and Abernathy were instrumental in founding the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). In January of that year, King's home and church in Montgomery were bombed as violence against black protesters continued.

King's personality was of a dual nature – the wish to live and fight for the rights of black people, but also the resignation to die and thus become a martyr. After the Montgomery bombing, King had said: “Lord, I hope no one will have to die as a result of our struggle for freedom in Montgomery. Certainly I don't want to die. But if anyone has to die, let it be me.”

King's life was filled with confrontations. He was always ready to go to a city or a scene to help show the power of nonviolence. In 1963, in Birmingham, Alabama, a *New York Times* reporter had said that Birmingham was a city that was culturally and racially backward: “The striking thing about Birmingham is that it seems so advanced industrially and so retarded politically.” Into this fray King threw himself. He was one of the black leaders whom people watched and from whom the most was expected.

These were the days when King began to use the language and wisdom of the visionary. In Detroit he had used the “I have a dream” motif which was to carry him far. Speaking at the March on Washington in 1963, he spoke notes that touched the very heart of America, ending his talk with the stirring lines: “Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!”

In 1963 King became Time Magazine's Man of the Year. In 1964 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, its youngest recipient in history. Through the years he was always willing to champion civil rights, as he did in leading a march across Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama in March, 1965. His resulting speech, delivered from the state capitol steps in Montgomery, included the question: “How long would it take for justice to take over the world? How long? Because mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord,” he quoted from the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*.

Dr. King's tragic end came in 1968 when he went to Memphis, Tennessee to help striking garbage workers. He was shot April 4, 1968 on the balcony outside his Memphis hotel room. No more fitting tribute could be raised to the slain believer in the power of nonviolence than one of his own statements: “If a man hasn't found something he will die for, he isn't fit to live.”