

Alton hosts forum to commemorate Dr. King's death in 1968 at hands of assassin James Earl Ray

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ALTON - Racism and Alton are no strangers to each other, even in the wake of Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech.

To discuss some of those issues, as well as how reconciliation can be found, Alton Ministerial Alliance President Jason Harrison hosted a forum at the Post Commons at 300 Alby Saturday afternoon. Both black and white speakers brought up many issues of race and reconciliation during that forum, including historian Charlotte Johnson

discussing Rocky Fork Church, minister Joyce Elliott discussing matters of school segregation and student discipline and a resident of Fairmont in Alton discussing the challenges faced by African Americans attempting to move into the upscale neighborhood.

Harrison said the event was set to commemorate Dr. King who was killed by Alton-born assassin James Earl Ray in April 1968 while in Memphis, Tennessee.

Many of the items discussed predated Dr. King's rise to national prominence. Charlotte Johnson's informational lecture regarding Rocky Fork Church, which was used as part of the Underground Railroad in the area around Camp Warren Levis in Godfrey.

The church acted as a way station for escaped slaves, and many of them were able to attain jobs and own property due to the efforts and network of that church.

Partially because of that history, Rocky Fork Church has been destroyed several times, including as recently as 1988 when it was burnt down by a vandal who believed it to be used as a place for devil worshippers, and in the 1970s by teenagers. Charlotte Johnson, who helped compile 20th Century African American Leaders in Alton, which Riverbender.com used as the principal resource for Black History Month profiles and coverage, also played a French composition inspired by that church and its history.

Harold Johnson also spoke at the event. He and his wife moved from Los Angeles, where Harold Johnson had above top secret clearance as a machinist and taught business as one of the first thousand African American men to hold a master's degree in America, to his hometown of Alton, where he was told he'd never make it as a machinist and was forced to sell loads of coal at 32 cents a ton, and attempted to get a place in Fairmont.

According to the upscale neighborhood's bylaws as recently as the late 1990s, non-Caucasian people were not allowed to live there. When he was a young boy, Harold Johnson said he dreamed of living in the neighborhood where he and his father delivered goods by horse and carriage but had to leave by 4 p.m.

"When I was young, I wanted to live in Fairmont and drive a Cadillac," he said. "I never did get that Cadillac."

Through the help of the federal government and lawyers from St. Louis and Chicago, the neighborhood's bylaws were changed to be more inclusive - completely removing the clause against non-Caucasian people moving into homes. That happened less than a decade ago, he said, and some neighbors still wouldn't speak to him and his wife.

One neighbor, however, rose above skin color, and while his wife never regarded Harold Johnson, the man became one of Harold's best friends. He recounted visiting him on his deathbed.

"He looked at me and said I was the best neighbor he ever had," he said. "He told me to never give up and stay the course and said I was able to make it in Fairmont."

Upscale mostly white neighborhoods are not the only battlegrounds for race relations in Alton. Elliott spoke in regards to the public school system, which should be a universal experience within the district and its area. Elliott, who said she learned about the culture of segregation when she went to middle school in 1959, said children are still being segregated by "behavioral disorders" and economic status. She said her own grandson qualified for gifted classes but was excluded due to economic status. She also said many behavioral disorders in the classroom come from a mix of bad parenting and teachers not working toward each student's unique learning style.

As a teaching assistant, Elliott said she worked with many students and increased behavior in one classroom by as much as 80 percent.

As a mother, Elliott said she took a proactive role in her children's studies, often encouraging learning at home as well as getting involved with students' learning at school.

She recounted a story of her daughter, who is now a medical doctor in Iowa, getting Bs on tests by one teacher, when she deserved As. She said she worked with the school to schedule a meeting with that teacher, and told the district her involvement with her children's education would not cease.

The program ended with minister Peter Hough discussing his Peace Meal initiative, which invites families of different racial backgrounds to enjoy meals with one another and discuss their experiences with race and how they differ and a prayer from Harrison's father, Reverend Greg Harrison, calling for God's assistance to bring reconciliation to Alton.