



Opinion Exchange

NEWS

'UNFINISHED BUSINESS'

Denise Johnson; Staff Writer

20 January 2008

Star-Tribune

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Charlayne Hunter-Gault's warm voice and authoritative presence is well-known to public radio and television fans. A veteran journalist, she reported for the New Yorker magazine and the New York Times, and for two decades was a national correspondent for "The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer." For the last 12 years, she's been based in South Africa as a correspondent, first for CNN and now for National Public Radio.

The Emmy-award winner not only covered America's civil rights movement - she was part of that story. In 1961, she was the first African-American woman admitted to the University of Georgia after NAACP lawyers took her case to court. During her first night in the dormitory, white students demonstrated against her admission and threw rocks through her windows. At times, she and the other black student who integrated the campus that year needed police escorts on campus.

Hunter-Gault will be the keynote speaker at Monday's 18th annual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. breakfast at the Minneapolis Convention Center, sponsored by the General Mills Foundation and the United Negro College Fund. The event is sold out but will be broadcast live at 8 a.m. on Twin Cities Public Television. For more information, go to mlkbreakfast.com.

Editorial writer Denise Johnson recently spoke with Hunter-Gault about King's legacy, race, and civil and human rights. Here are excerpts from the conversation:

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Q - You will address the theme "Answering the Call" to encourage community service consistent with Dr. King's legacy. What is your view of America's standing on civil and human rights and living up to King's dreams?

A - What is wonderful about the Minneapolis event and other commemorations is that they recognize people who

are committed and connected to the values of Dr. King. We achieved a lot during the civil-rights movement following his leadership. Things that enabled us to realize our dreams are things we now have to work to protect. We have children and grandchildren - we have to ensure that those things are present in the lives of those who come behind us.

Democracy, although it's the best we've got, is not perfect. We have to continue to be vigilant. There is a Haitian proverb: Beyond the mountains, more mountains. King was trying to prepare us for that. While we might have gotten to the mountaintop on the strength of his values and activism - beyond the mountain are more mountains. Commemorations of King say to me that there are people who are aware of this challenge.

Q - During your career, you have been the first woman, first African-American or both in several positions. Now we have a presidential campaign with the first black and first woman as frontrunners - and one in which race has been raised in interesting ways. What's your assessment?

A - Race is featured in a very contentious primary - again that reminds us to be vigilant. But I'm not pessimistic. I'm encouraged even when the discourse is contentious. However uncomfortable that makes us, we talk about it, we debate it and that's healthy. This is some of the most-energetic debate about race I've seen in a long time - especially since 9/11, when people were so traumatized. Americans are coming out of that dismal period to actually engage in what democracy means and take on some of the unfinished business of the civil-rights movement. Race is that unfinished business.

Q - And how should it be addressed?

A - Debate, discussion, honest conversations. MLK said the movement must include blacks and whites, young and old, north and south. We need organizations that embrace all kinds of Americans who will talk openly, more groups that include people who disagree. No one can do it alone. We need people of all races, classes and backgrounds.

That's why this campaign is so exciting; it has awakened young people, poor people. Having the discussion involving two people with good [civil-rights] credentials helps. [Obama and Clinton] are not symbolic figures. They are people of substance who have earned their positions.

In America, we've had periodic eruptions around race. We talked about two separate societies after riots in 1968,

then discussions occurred again after Rodney King. But there isn't an ongoing, constructive conversation. We need to figure out how to harness this energy into something lasting that benefits we the people.

Q - In the 1960s, you and another black student desegregated the University of Georgia. Today, many American public schools, due to housing patterns and poverty, have become resegregated - especially for lower-income students of color. Should we work for more desegregation or improve learning for students where they are?

A - This has been a painful thing to see. We have to do both - upgrade schools and expose children to those who don't look like them. I do worry about the "two nations" issue. The problem with single-race schools is that they almost never get the equality they deserve. The other part is psychic. When you compete on an equal level with people who look different from you, you are empowered in a different way.

If America isn't careful, it will become a Third World country. It is in the best interest of Americans to ensure that, as Dr. King used to say, all children have equal access to success. India and China are moving to meet the needs of millions through education. There is a lesson in what they are doing - building the middle class. Americans need to be informed about the importance of investing in their own so that the nation can remain competitive.

Q - You've mentioned values several times both around King's legacy and about education.

A - That is part of what we're losing in America. Even in the segregated society I grew up in - with hand-me-down books from the white schools that had pages torn out of them - we succeeded because of values that our teachers, mamas, papas and neighborhoods taught us. There was a circle [of adults] who ensured that we had those values. We need to recapture that.

And I think we are sufficiently mature as African-Americans to be able to talk about our issues and not worry about who overhears and how they are going to react. We have a foot in the door of so many places of power now that when someone messes with us, something can be done. We must have concentrated attention, more creative ways of thinking about race, education and solving other problems, because our future is at stake.

Q - Other ways to "answer the call?"

A - Put the minds of those who benefitted from Dr. King's movement to work. Even as well-educated, young people make megabucks in corporations, have them detailed to these issues. It is OK for them to be making a lot of money, but it is not OK to make it in isolation. Use what you've got in spare time or make time to give back and concentrate your abilities on some of these perplexing issues.

Q - Are there parallels between the struggle for civil rights in America and South Africa?

A - You have evolving societies. Tremendous progress has been made, and much of that progress cannot be reversed. The same is true here in South Africa. I worry about some regression, though. In the states; we certainly should have done even better by now.

Any nation must build its middle class to become a country that will attract investment and growth. In South Africa, the legacy of oppression and deprivation is so great, no government on earth could address it alone. What this government has done is concentrate on growing the economy, sometimes at the expense of reducing poverty. Only time will tell whether that approach was the right one and whether the change in government here will eradicate poverty faster.

Q - For many years, you have covered Africa. Although Kenya was considered relatively stable, its current troubles follow the pattern of several other nations on the continent, namely leaders who won't let go.

A - What's happening in Kenya is disturbing: We thought we had a relatively stable democracy there. Africa has had corrupt leaders. In the past - and this is not to excuse corruption - but some of this the American government promoted or at least looked the other way and made possible, when despots stood against communism. So that helped to establish the kleptocracies.

In Kenya right now, that is at the bottom of what's going on. The Kikuyus of the ruling party have been in power to the detriment of others. That whole pattern has been rampant in Africa. Now people are rising up and saying no.

I think that pattern is changing. New rules from the African Union are starting to create another set of dynamics. A growing number of leaders are leaving office democratically. A new ethos is emerging. Nongovernmental, civil-society groups are holding the feet of the powerful to the fire. The international community can help those who are trying to ensure more transparency, respect for human rights, empowerment of women, thoughtful fiscal management, etc. It is important for the world to support those things, because the world will benefit from a

strong, healthy continent of empowered people.

ILLUSTRATION;PHOTO

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ENTERTAINMENT

Anything's possible; Backup singer turned ``American Idol" finalist Melinda Doolittle heads to Minneapolis to honor Martin Luther King.

Jon Bream; Staff Writer

20 January 2008

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``American Idol" 2007 finalist Melinda Doolittle has her repertoire ready for a Martin Luther King Day breakfast Monday in Minneapolis: "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," "Happy Birthday" (Stevie Wonder's tribute to MLK) and "There Will Come a Day," which she sang on "Idol."

"And I'm going to add one more," she said Tuesday.

How `bout Jonny Lang's "Anything's Possible"? She sang background vocals on the recording, and it features a snippet of a famous King speech.

"That's a really good idea, thank you," she said. "It's a perfect song for that day. I should ask [the producers] for the [instrumental] tracks. We're in Nashville, so it can be done quickly."

The producers of the Lang song happen to be collaborating with Doolittle on her debut. But more on that project in a moment.

First, let's talk "Idol." Doolittle was amped for this season's opening night. She was about to go "buy the fixin's" for a dinner party with friends to watch "Idol" at her suburban Nashville home.

"I'm ready to find somebody to vote for," she proclaimed. "I want to find that person and stick with that person through the whole process. I'm getting TiVo because it's very important that I not miss a night."

From backup to star

A year ago, Doolittle was a successful backup singer, with credits including BeBe and CeCe Winans, Michael McDonald, Alabama and Aaron Neville.

"I was so content being a background singer and I thought that's what I was going to do the rest of my life," said the 30-year-old vocalist. "'Idol' opened my eyes to show me that it was possible for me to get out there and actually sing lead."

While pundits debate the ability of recent "Idol" champs Jordin Sparks and Taylor Hicks to deliver hit records, Doolittle isn't concerned.

"I know the music business is changing and it may look like they have low sales," she said. "But I look at somebody like Fergie, who in her first week sold less than what Jordin sold in her first week, but now she's at 3 million [for 'The Dutchess']. So I think there are different ways to market Jordin's product and I think she's going to do great."

Since Doolittle's "Idol" tour ended last fall, she has sung at the White House for America's Youth Alliance (President Bush asked to sit next to her at dinner), toured as a backup singer for Michael W. Smith's Christmas concerts and starred in a PBS holiday special taped at Belmont University in Nashville, her alma mater. This winter, she began making her debut album.

"I'm loving every second of it," said Doolittle, who hopes to record a duet with Lang. "I'm really getting to tell my story. It's kind of old school meets the new school, kind of like soul music with an edge."

She thinks she's close to finalizing a recording contract. She is recording with producers Shannon Sanders and Drew Ramsey, who helmed background sessions she did for Lang and India.Arie.

Said Doolittle: "Drew and Shannon are amazing writers, and they are being helpful with me in the process and being patient because I haven't done a lot of writing in the past."

A native of St. Louis, Doolittle doesn't know how patient she'll be with the Minnesota weather this weekend. She may have to borrow a coat from her aunt, Diane Doolittle, who has lived in the Twin Cities for a few years. In fact, Aunt Diane was instrumental in Doolittle performing Monday at the King breakfast. General Mills, where Diane works, is a sponsor of the 18th annual event, which will be broadcast at 8 a.m. on KTCA, Channel 2.

"It's pretty early on a Monday morning," said Doolittle. "I'm not technically used to singing that early."

But anything's possible.

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Jon Bream - 612-673-1719

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MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. HOLIDAY BREAKFAST

With: "American Idol" singer Melinda Doolittle and journalist Charlayne Hunter-Gault.

When: 7 a.m. Mon. (broadcast live at 8 a.m. on KTCA, Ch. 2).

Where: Minneapolis

Convention Center.

Tickets: Sold out.

Web: www.mlkbreakfast.org .

PHOTO

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BREAKFAST SHOWS 'KING WAS FOR ALL'; ST. PAUL CHURCH WOMEN'S TRADITIONAL MEXICAN BREAKFAST IS ANNUAL COMMUNITY TRIBUTE TO CIVIL RIGHTS LEADER'S WORK

RICHARD CHIN; Pioneer Press

22 January 2008

St. Paul Pioneer Press

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TWIN CITIES -- "Everybody can be great. Because anybody can serve. ... You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love." -- Martin Luther King Jr.

You also needed to be up by 5 a.m. cracking 360 eggs if you were serving breakfast in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. at Augustana Lutheran Church in West St. Paul.

That's what about a dozen women from Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church in St. Paul did early Monday morning in what has become a tradition for the city's West Side and West St. Paul: a free breakfast of chorizo sausage, eggs, salsa, refried beans and tortillas for anyone in the community who wants to celebrate the civil rights leader's legacy.

The Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday Breakfast is an 18-year-old program in the Twin Cities sponsored by the United Negro College Fund and the General Mills Foundation.

The main event was a \$30-a-seat breakfast for 2,000 held at the Minneapolis Convention Center, featuring a keynote address by Emmy and Peabody award-winning journalist Charlayne Hunter-Gault.

But the tradition has been expanded into four neighborhood breakfasts in St. Paul churches, plus locations in Duluth and River Falls, Wis.

St. Paul's West Side breakfast rotates each year among Augustana Lutheran and Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church and St. Matthew Catholic Church, both in St. Paul. But the ladies of Our Lady do the cooking each year.

Wearing hairnets and aprons with the image of the Virgin Mary that appeared in Mexico, the church women usually cook funeral lunches and Friday enchilada suppers during Lent at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church.

On Monday morning, however, they chatted about the Green Bay Packers' playoff loss, cracked eggs, heated about 30 pounds of sausage and searched for bowls to serve the salsa in the unfamiliar kitchen at Augustana Lutheran.

Rosemary Campos, one of the volunteer cooks, said she was 16 when King was killed.

She grew up in Kansas, she said, at a time when Mexican-American girls weren't expected to go to college. She joined the Marines instead. But when her children went to school, Campos went to college. Now, she teaches in the St. Paul school district. She had the day off from work Monday, and she could have slept in.

"I wouldn't get up at 5 in the morning for anything other than this," Campos said. "Because it's for the whole community. The whole community gets to go to it, gets the know that we're active, that we care."

About 200 people showed up for breakfast at Augustana, where they also watched a television broadcast of Hunter-Gault's speech in Minneapolis.

"Because of (King) we can all be out here together," Campos said of the multiracial and multiethnic group gathering for the event.

"The message is that Martin Luther King was for all folks," said West Side community leader Gilbert de la O, who was the emcee for the breakfast. "He was out there for the farm workers, for Cesar Chavez. We have a Mexican breakfast to honor that."

The church women weren't the only volunteers who helped make the West St. Paul breakfast happen. Youths from Augustana's confirmation class and Humboldt High School's ROTC program also woke before dawn on their day off from school to help serve the meal.

"The program is mostly about leadership and helping out with the community," said Irwin Cano, a 17-year-old ROTC member at Humboldt. "That's what we do."

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3 Photos: PHOTOS BY JOHN DOMAN, PIONEER PRESS; 1,2) Society of Our Lady of Guadalupe member Francisca Vega-Taylor, of Woodbury, navigates a heavy cast-iron skillet of eggs and spicy chorizo sausage across the kitchen of Augustana Lutheran Church in West St. Paul. A dozen women from the group serve a free Mexican-style Martin Luther King Jr. Day breakfast annually at one of three St. Paul and West St. Paul churches.

Below: The cooks crack 10 dozen eggs at a time, 360 in all, to serve 200 people.; 3) A member of Society of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Ginger Yanez, of St. Paul, places salsa on tables in the fellowship hall at Augustana Lutheran Church before the day's Martin Luther King Jr. Day breakfast. The society supplies a free community breakfast, Mexican style, each year to mark the holiday. The event also included a televised speech of the bigger morning breakfast event at the Minneapolis Convention Center.

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