

Meeting Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: An Unexpected Encounter that Forever Changed My Life

By Delores A. Moore, SSND Associate and Associate Coordinator, Baltimore

For you to more fully appreciate the impact of this chance life-changing encounter, some personal background information must be shared.

And so it begins...I was born in the same two-room house as was my mother and her siblings, built by my grandfather who died before he could construct the mansion he promised my grandmother he would complete someday. I was the third child and the second girl so there was nothing special about me except I was now the third wheel. As such, I became a loner and kept my own counsel, my closest companion being my thumb!

Three younger siblings were born after me, but my isolation remained intact. My nickname was "Los," short for Lost. My parents divorced, and we moved to Maryland, where we were the first Black children with one or two other families to integrate into our elementary school, #10, in South Baltimore. Our education was of no real concern to our teachers. You either got it or you didn't. So, of course, we quickly learned to keep quiet if we were unsure of the answer and to never ask questions. My mother later remarried a widower with children, and we became a blended family. Needless to say, a full house!

At the age of eight, I moved to Connecticut to live with my childless aunt and uncle. To the chagrin of my 3rd-grade teacher, Ms. Mountstream, she discovered I could not read. With her caring and encouragement, and my aunt and her wooden ruler, I learned to read in earnest by 5th grade. But that early learned experience of keeping quiet and eyes downcast remained, and my southern drawl in a Yankee environment made me stick out like a sore thumb and further made me a loner.

My aunt worked on my not being a loner, always pushing me to make friends and try new things. When the church a few doors up the street from the beauty salon she owned was selling dinners to help raise money for something down south, and the ladies in the shop had placed orders, my aunt told me to go pick them up. I was told to ask for a certain lady at the side door of the kitchen, and she would have the dinner ready for me to pick up. Scared, shy, and with my head down, I knocked on the door and told them the name of the shop. The dinners weren't ready, so she told me to go sit down in the dining room, and she would bring the dinners to me when they were ready.

I did as I was instructed, but saw some men in suits sitting around a large table, and more were coming in. I backed out of the room because in my southern upbringing children knew their place, but I was promptly ushered back to the room. I sat in a dark corner with my head bowed and eyes downcast. I remember the last group of men came in, and they were louder and more jubilant than the others already in the room. I recall all of the men were in suits except the one sitting at the head of the table. He had on a white shirt with his sleeves folded up to the elbows, and his tie was loose. The men were asking him lots of questions, and he had them laughing and sharing stories while I sat in the dark corner and tried not to be seen and prayed that the ladies would hurry up so I could leave.

Suddenly I heard the man with a booming voice say, "What's your name, little girl?" All the men in the room turned their heads in my direction and acknowledged my presence for the first time. I was so scared I wanted to cry, but I managed to get out my name while still keeping

my head down. "Delores Cotton," I said. He asked where I went to school and what grade I was in. He guessed my age "around 9" and asked where I was from because by my accent he knew it was somewhere down south. When I said Baltimore, he asked me which church I attended and then asked me if I knew Rev. Dobson at Union Baptist, Thurgood Marshall, Juanita Mitchell, and other Mitchells, and a host of other people. He then educated the entire room about the good work the folks in Baltimore were doing for the Civil Rights movement.

He made me feel so proud because, of course, I knew Rev. Dobson and the Mitchells; they lived in my neighborhood. I was finally proud to be from such an important place in the eyes of these northern folks. I was proud to be me, not ashamed of being different from others.

Wouldn't you know it, just when the conversation was really at its height, the lady comes in with my dinners. As I got up to leave, she asked the man in the white shirt, "Dr. King are you ready for your lunch now?"

I was so proud I wouldn't let the ladies give me a tip for picking up their dinners. I was also so afraid that I would get in trouble for staying in the room while grownups were talking that I never told a soul.

The next week I went to school still the shyest girl in class, but I took the opposing side against the entire class and led our weekly debate - the topic was "Is there such a thing as nothing?" By the end of the debate, everyone agreed with me except two boys, Stewart and Umberto, who later became my best friends.

I wholeheartedly attribute my courage and passion-filled voice for causes of justice and equality to a once-in-a-lifetime chance encounter with this courageous giant of a man who took the time to acknowledge the existence and human worth of a little girl, no longer Los, but found!