

No Stopping Point Short of Victory

By Andria K. Brown

I consider myself adequately educated and aware of my surroundings, but I discovered how much I didn't know about one of the pivotal moments in American history, and about Memphis, when I recently read *Hellhound on His Trail*. A native Memphian who grew up in the era he recounts, author Hampton Sides presents all known elements involved in the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The book not only follows the trail of James Earl Ray as it leads up to April 4, 1968, but also focuses on the new vision Dr. King was moving toward in his final months and how Memphis played a role in that vision.

In the interest of pursuing true equality for all Americans, Dr. King was in the process of forming the Poor People's Campaign, complete with a march and camp-in on Washington, D.C. to protest the mistreatment of America's poor and the administration's lack of action against poverty. Although it seemed a distraction and minor issue to many around him, Sides explains how the sanitation worker's strike in Memphis represented to Dr. King a critical step on the path toward economic justice.

Reading Sides' book, I was struck by the parallels between that time and our own: the philosophically charged presidential election, the murky war, the growing sense of division among the citizenry. In one of the less-quoted sections of his Mountaintop speech, delivered the night before his death, King himself proclaimed that the nation was "sick."

He had not given up hope, however, for its healing.

"Something is happening in Memphis," he said that stormy night. "Something is happening in our world."

Memphis had an opportunity in 1968 to make a statement against injustice that resonated throughout the country. The loss of that opportunity, shadowed by the loss of Dr. King, settled into the long list of great-things-that-weren't, another moment sabotaging our civic self-esteem.

But we have also tried, in our way, to honor his legacy. The National Civil Rights Museum, housed in the very building where King was struck down, has presented his message to more than three million visitors. Beyond those walls, however, lie Memphis' true potential to affect change.

The current parallels with 1968 don't stop with the political climate. Long outlasting the usual news cycle, the case of Trayvon Martin's death has held public attention and reignited the discussion of race in our country. For many, it seems to be another wedge that will polarize our views, but in a city as diverse as Memphis, the case is also a rare chance to discuss the difficult issues that are often pushed to the periphery.

Race, class, and the dispensation of justice were hot buttons in King's time and they remain so today. The difference is that, in a world where we can read an essay by the chair of Stanford's African-American studies department as easily as watch the local news, we have a much better chance to hear all sides.

As Memphians, in particular, we have a chance to move forward. We still have some of the deep juxtapositions of the 1960s, as seen in our city school system, infant mortality rates, and starkly different rates of employment. But we also have the momentum of our gains, and a city that is slowly but surely finding common ground. It remains worth noting that the last two men elected as our mayor oversaw a Memphis that had, in their own lifetimes, denied them their most basic rights.

Martin Luther King, Jr. came to this city not in symbolism, but in service. Sides writes that King felt there was a special feeling present in Memphis, a thoughtfulness and willingness combined, that made its citizens uniquely equipped to advance the cause of true equal rights. This is still that city, and we are still those people, even two generations removed.

There is something happening in the world, without a doubt. It is up to us to make sure something is still happening in Memphis.