



Caroline Heubel

Identity and Community II

Dr. Phillips

February 5, 2001

A Life Shaped by a Dream

“The Ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.”

Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The 1960’s in the US proved to be such a decade, one of challenge and controversy. While American soldiers were fighting the “enemy” in Vietnam, state troopers were breaking up the marches of civil rights activists with tear gas, billy clubs, and bullwhips, in full sight of television cameras. Rising above the madness, a Baptist minister stood with a dream of non-violence. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. set forth goals of social and economic justice at the time when our nation needed them the most, but when few were ready to listen.

“Through courage, energy, intelligence, and oratory, he united blacks and whites in the moral cause of racial equality” (Miller 228). I had the opportunity to interview one of these activists in person, my uncle, David Hollister, and discuss the impact of King’s amazing strengths. He described the Reverend’s “clear vision and ability to use a combination of biblical references, constitutional and American values [to promote] social and economic justice.” After hearing

Martin Luther King, Jr. speak on the campus of Michigan State University in 1965, the 23 year old teacher, volunteered to travel South and teach in the segregated black schools of Mississippi. But the impact of his role model's words did not end there, nor after King's assassination in April 1968. Hollister "remained dedicated to 'equality, peace and justice' for all citizens" (Lansing Magazine, April 1994) and continued to mobilize activists through education. He worked on Bobby Kennedy's presidential campaign, and later became involved politically, as County Commissioner. Today, and since 1993, he holds the office of Mayor of Lansing, and the ideas orated by King continue to influence his work daily.

Heubel: *"How and why did you get involved in the political movement of the 60's?"*

Hollister: "Well, I graduated from high school in 1960. It was a white middle class high school, it only had one African American in the whole high school, so I didn't really come at this with a particular commitment to civil rights. I came to the University to get my degree; I was originally going to be a minister. I had been accepted at Princeton, but I got married and had a child. So I decided to get a teaching certificate, hoping that I could earn enough money to go to Princeton and not have to work the first year.

Well it didn't actually work out that way. I got my first [teaching] job in Durand, Michigan. When I was in Durand, the fall of '64, the kids were very racist. Durand is an all white community, a suburb of Flint, and kids would brag about going to Flint and throw[ing] bottles at black kids and get into fights. So I decided to teach a unit on black history. I wrote to the NAACP, the Urban League and some of the national organizations. But the community really

resisted this teaching. We were threatened, and we had a cross burn in my front yard. I was given the option of being fired or resigning. Nine of us resigned in one day, all of the new teachers, all kind of liberal. So I came back to Michigan State University to get my masters degree.

I was teaching at Eastern high school, and I was going to school at night, when I had an opportunity to hear King, who was speaking on campus in '65. I got there late, I [sat] up in the balcony. King spoke extemporaneously for about 40 minutes to an hour, just laying out his vision of social justice. I was so moved by his speech that when he got done and he went off the stage down the back, I went down the back stairs of the auditorium, met him at the bottom of the stairs, and said I would volunteer and teach in the Mississippi Freedom schools. Little did I realize what I was getting myself into... But I was so moved by his vision and his call to action that I volunteered for the STEP Project. It was the Student Tutorial Education Project. Bob Green, who is currently back on campus, was one of King's lieutenants, and John Duley, a professor of religion, were organizing the crew. We took about 35 kids and we all were volunteers. We had to organize the curriculum, raise the money and [collect] the books."

Heubel: *"What were some of King's goals when he solicited white teachers from the North to go volunteer in the South, and how did you go about accomplishing them?"*

Hollister: "Our goal was to take kids who were graduates of the black segregated schools in Mississippi and get them ready for college, and try and do that in one summer. I would say that these were the brightest kids in the black schools. Most of them had the equivalent of a middle

school or junior high school education, but the books were inferior. US History textbooks would be given to the black schools after the white schools had used them for five years. But they would rip out the Constitution, and the Declaration of Independence. So you couldn't expect these young kids to be able to pass an entrance exam that was based on Constitutional principles. [In addition], there was a voting rights requirement in '65, when we went down there the first time, that you had to pass a Constitutional test before you could even register to vote. So we would take copies of the Declaration of Independence, of the Constitution, and copies of new textbooks. They couldn't believe it, it was just amazing. And we would raise reading levels three or four grades, and we were there about 2 months. [We also had courses in] math, science, literature and writing. Our goal was to get them ready to compete. And some of those kids went on to Northern colleges, or to black colleges in the South, and those were good schools! But the black colleges were really putting the emphasis on empowerment and improvement. So if the kids could make it through that first year of black college, they could probably make it. So that was our goal, to keep those kids, to keep them in [the program]. Some of them came up to Michigan State, after a couple years, and so over the years I've run into some of those kids that have done really well."

Heubel: *"When and for what period of time did you travel to Mississippi? What other experiences did you have there?"*

Hollister: "I went the summer of '65 and then again in '68. We went down in the middle of June and came back the middle of August. So we were down there about 8 weeks. This is our first

summer down [holding up a black and white picture]. It was Rust College in Holly Springs. The college sits on the highest land in Northwest Mississippi, which gives the black folks in that community protection, because there was a lot of violence: drive-by shootings and stuff like that. That was quite frightening. Also, when we got there, we found not only that we were teaching a lot of really bright kids, but that their parents and grandparents had never learned to read and write. That's how segregated they were. So we set up classes. I brought back some textbooks from 8th grade Civics that would say 'George Washington was a great white man', and that's how it would start. They would do nothing but reinforce the inferiority of blacks, [saying that] the Civil War was not a war over slavery it was the war over Southern independence, and they would belittle the Northern people for being hypocrites.

It was quite a life-changing experience. For example, we wanted to integrate the swimming pool downtown. We let the mayor know that on the next day we were going to come down there to swim; and if they challenged us we were going to take them to court. We got there and they had emptied the swimming pool. They would rather deny everybody access to swimming than they would to allow for integration. They would not get in the water if we had integrated it. So we had a number of those kinds of experiences, and when that happens to you -- I'm a naïve white middle class kid [accentuating KID] who didn't really understand the depth of racism -- you come back pretty much committed to this whole idea of working for social justice. I came back to Eastern high school and organized a student group that looked at issues of racial equality. I got in trouble with the administration for that. Just talking about racial issues at that time was very controversial. I helped organize a group called the Greater Lansing Community Organization, that dealt with issues of race [and] gender. We were one of the first groups to

promote the women's liberation movement, and we also got deeply involved in opposing the war in Vietnam.

All of that kind of grew out of my first experience with King. By '67 and early '68, King had gone from being an advocate for civil rights to being an advocate for peace in Vietnam. He was severely criticized for that, [people would say] that if you're a civil right's leader, you shouldn't be talking about international relations. During his last 6 or 7 months, he started focusing on economic justice, calling on corporate America to invest more and more of their resources in urban America. What you saw were cities being segregated, people fleeing to the suburbs, investments in the suburbs, and the shrinking of the economic vitality of urban areas across America. He was becoming much more of an advocate for social and economic justice when he was killed in April."

Heubel: *"What was your family's reaction when you told them of your decision to go volunteer in the South? Did they share your views?"*

Hollister: "We had a child, Jerry. It was interesting, my mother-in-law didn't want [my wife and I] to go. She was very adamant that first we not go, and that, if we went, we not take our son. [She said] the risks were too high. [My wife] was a willing partner...she was a bit reluctant. King had just written a book called Why we can't wait, and he would later win the Nobel Peace Prize for it. After she read the book she said 'I agree.' In fact, when I taught school, I would have that as a required reading for all of my students. I also had my three children read that book before they graduated from high school, because it really lays out the ideal of a democratic society and

also the failing of a democratic society and then a strategy of how to deal with it. It's all non-violent direct action. You have to be willing to pay the consequences of your non-violent actions. If you're going to break the law, be prepared to be arrested and go to jail. And I [wasn't]. I had an intellectual understanding of that before I went to Mississippi, but I didn't have a clear emotional attachment to the issue until I actually experienced the racism and the hatred through the various experiences that we had."

Heubel: *"What were the dangers you faced?"*

Hollister: "Once you were down there, you had no choice, you were stuck there for the summer. It was scary. [pause] We were followed, insulted and threatened, but [none of us] ever got hurt. Other civil rights workers were hurt. James Meredith was shot 18 miles from where we were, a week before we went down for the first time. The second year we went down there, in '68, three civil rights workers, Swarner, Goodman and Chaney, young kids from New York, [had been] killed and found in a grave by a lake about fifty miles from where we were. So death and violence were always, always on your mind."

Heubel: *"How did you deal with these risks?"*

Hollister: "We had to take classes of non-violence. We had to read the writings of King and Gandhi and some biblical readings. We actually had to sign a pledge of non-violence. Then we went through a non-violent training program, and we had some police officers come in and show

us how to defend ourselves if someone was going to beat us up; but we had to promise not to strike back, and that was the pledge that we had to make. And it didn't really hit home until the first night. We left from Lansing, drove to Nashville, where we stayed in a seminary. That night, an FBI agent addressed the group and they separated the men from the women. Then they told us what we were to expect. There would be people waiting for us at the border, they would follow us. There would be the possibility of them trying to run us off the road. We had to unload our car of all the hammers and screw drivers. We couldn't have any tools because they could be interpreted to be weapons, and you could be arrested for carrying a weapon. We had a number that was written on our arm, to call in case anything happened to us, because if we called the local police, chances are they were part of the Klan, so you had to have a federal number. That night I was scared to the point that I could hardly sleep.

When we got on the campus of Rust College, having a young son who was just a toddler (he was just 18 months old), he would run around and jump on everybody, and everybody would pick him up. For some people that was the first time they'd ever touched a white person, and for some of us, it would be the first time we'd ever touched black people. But Jerry really broke the ice. It was something we constantly worried about, him being kidnapped. The kids liked to take him, play with him, and take him downtown, but it was something we were always very very frightened and worried about."

Heubel: *"How had things changed when you went back the second time?"*

Hollister: "The second time we went down, things had changed dramatically [pause]."

Heubel: *“For the better or worse?”*

Hollister: “Dramatically [in a stronger voice]. King was killed in April ‘68 [slowly and in a more serious tone] and I could look out my window in Lansing and see the sky of Detroit on fire...the city of Detroit was on fire [accentuating ‘on fire’], whole blocks were set on fire with riots. The National Guard was called. And that was going on in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, Baltimore... Since King was an advocate of non-violence, to be violently killed gave a lot of support to the more radical black leaders. A guy by the name of Stokely Carmichael was calling for black power, and there were other voices in the black community criticizing King for being naive. [They believed] that this really should have been an armed revolution, that the way to take power was to grab a gun and go out and shoot the white power structure. So when we went down the second time, with King being killed, the dynamics were much different, the hopefulness was much more tenuous.”

Heubel: *“What happened after King was assassinated? How did his death affect you and the cause you were fighting for?”*

Hollister: “You’ve got to remember that after King was killed, Bobby Kennedy kind of stepped into that vacuum, and quieted the crowds in Washington. He actually walked into a riot situation, got up on a car, and talked about how his brother had been killed, and how this violence had to be rejected. Kennedy really became the lightning rod for the civil rights movement anti-war

movements, and then he got involved in the race for president in '68. So now you had a shift from King being the advocate for social justice, to Bobby Kennedy.

I personally got involved in Bobby Kennedy's campaign. I took a group of Eastern high school students down to Notre Dame. A whole bunch of Michigan State students went to the Indiana primary, and I was the only one who took high school students. I got in trouble for that too. All of the adult sponsors were told not to go, so I took all the responsibility. If anything had happened I would have been liable, but I was determined to carry on this crusade that I was very much committed to. Some of the Kennedy people were quite critical of high school kids. When we showed up with a bus full of kids they just thought, 'oh my God, we're going to have to baby-sit them.' And they turned out to be excellent kids, they did everything they were asked to do, and actually had a chance to meet Kennedy, which was a big thrill for them. Kennedy won that primary. He went on, about a month later, to win the California primary, and then he was killed [pause]. So in April, King was killed, and then in June, Kennedy was killed.

A group of us got together at Michigan State, at the student union. The war was raging, our peace advocates had been killed, the streets were inflamed, and when Kennedy was killed there were riots again. And there was a group that said, 'let's form a commune and move to Canada,' because Canada was a haven for peace-advocates who wanted to avoid the draft. And the other group said, 'let's all run for an office, let's change it from within.' And there were 13 of us sitting in the Big Ten Room, at round tables. We voted to stay and change it from within. And one guy said, 'well I'll run for the state senate,' [another] 'I'll run for sheriff,' 'I'll run for...' It gets to me and I say, 'well what's left?' I'm the last one. They say: 'well, County Commissioner, you can run for County Commissioner.' I said: 'what does a County

Commissioner do?' 'I don't know,' [they said] 'but you can run.' I said: 'well.... alright, I'll run.' Now this is on a Saturday. The next Saturday we're leaving for Mississippi for the second time.

To run for County Commissioner in 1968, you needed 20 signatures on a petition (pause)...20. So I went over to Cristo Ray Community Center, which is a Hispanic, and kind of an activist center in North Lansing, and it was also in my district. I got 20 people to sign the petition, I dropped it off at the clerk's office, and I went to Mississippi. Now I'm in Mississippi in '68, about the second week in August, I get a letter from the clerk saying: 'Congratulations you are the Democratic nominee for County Commissioner.' I didn't even know what a County Commissioner was, and I didn't belong to the Democratic Party. I wasn't a party person, I was just an activist who was trying to change things. The only reason I won was because nobody [else] filed.

I came back in August; school started in September; the election was in November. And I took my 7th hour senior Government class at Eastern high school, and I said: 'I don't know anything about running for County Commissioner, but if you want to take it on as a project, we'll make it a learning thing and invite speakers. You'll learn and I'll learn, and we'll go out and win this campaign.' And that's what I did. If you look at Hollister signs and bumper stickers they're always blue and gold, and that's from Eastern high school. That was one of the first things the kids decided.

So I was elected to County Commission in November '68 and there were two democrats: Grady Porter, who was an African American factory worker, and myself. There were 19 republicans. Everybody in the courthouse, the sheriff, the registrar, the clerk, and all the judges were republicans. And the first night, after we got sworn in and I took the oath of office, I

introduced two resolutions: one was to end the war in Vietnam, and the second was to support the Ceasar Chavez Boycott in California. And that created so much anger that I was afraid that I would be beaten up by the other commissioners on the way home. I still have the pants that I wore. I wore bell-bottoms. I had a peace symbol on the pants, and I had a peace symbol around my neck; I was kind of seen as a hippie.”

Heubel: *“What kept you going through all this, especially when the majority was against you?”*

Hollister: “The sense that it was right. Once you get involved in [working towards social and economic justice], other opinions don’t matter as much as your conviction that you have to make changes.”

“David Hollister believes, like King, perhaps explaining his frequent unwillingness to back down on social issues, that equality, peace and justice will not be achieved quickly. They are long-term battles” (Lansing Magazine, April 1994). The 58 year old mayor has already dedicated a lifetime to fighting these battles, and incorporates King’s ideals in virtually everything he does. He explains further: “as a State Legislator, [for example], I served on the welfare budget, even though I knew it was politically a liability. As mayor, we’ve done a lot to get investment in the city. General Motor’s recent announcement of two plants, one in downtown, was very much a follow-up to that value that King articulated about social and economic justice.” Even when faced with adversity, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s definition of the “ultimate measure of a man”

lives on through such activists as David Hollister, who have shaped their lives around this timeless dream.