

Fredericksburg's annual MLK Jr. celebration honors local 'Hidden Figures'

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Grace Garnett Sprow (left), Jerine Mercer McConnell, Becky Reed, Marie Johnson Rollins, Marci Catlett and Hashmel Turner sing 'We Shall Overcome' on Sunday. Sprow, McConnell, Reed and Rollins were all Hidden Figure award recipients

Goolrick's Modern Pharmacy in downtown Fredericksburg is known for its old-fashioned soda fountain.

But Marie Johnson Rollins didn't go there before desegregation to order one of its specialties, a tall, frosty milkshake.

Rollins, now in her 90s, was taking part in a sit-in seeking equal rights for blacks.

The waitresses were forced to serve them, Xavier Richardson said as he announced Rollins as the first of four recipients of the new "Hidden Figures"

awards at the 12th Annual Community-wide Celebration of the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday, which was held Sunday afternoon at James Monroe High School.

The awards honor those unsung, local heroes who worked to better the Fredericksburg-area community, and are named after Margot Lee Shetterly's book about the black female mathematicians at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration who helped put a man on the moon.

"I felt we need to pay tribute to them," Richardson said after the ceremony. "We hear about leaders, but not those behind the scenes."

Rollins' involvement with the Civil Rights Movement didn't end at Goolrick's. She got arrested for taking part in a sit-in at the 2400 Diner on Princess Anne Street, and was among the crowd of around 250,000 people who heard King deliver his famous "I Have a Dream" speech during the 1963 March on Washington.

She also sent her daughters to Maury Elementary School before integration. Today one daughter is the assistant superintendent of Fredericksburg City Schools and another is one of the longest serving members of the Fredericksburg School Board.

The audience of nearly 700 people filling the JMHS auditorium gave Rollins a standing ovation. Some of those attending had walked over from Hurkamp Park, where nearly 200 people had braved the cold to attend a Virginia Votes 2018 rally earlier that afternoon. The nonpartisan Fredericksburg group was organized following the controversial outcome of some recent high-profile elections in Virginia. Its goal is to push for improvements in Virginia's election system.

"This issue is not red or blue," said Kenny Boddye, the Occoquan District Democratic Committee Chairman and one of the rally speakers. "It's voting rights. It's voting rights to have our vote heard."

The other speakers, several of whom invoked King as "the champion of voter rights," included House District 28 candidate Joshua Cole, who lost by a narrow margin in an election where some voters received the wrong ballot; House District 94 candidate Shelly Simonds, whose tie vote was settled by picking a name from a bowl; and DD Lecky, a Fredericksburg business owner who received the wrong ballot in the 88th District.

Excerpts from King's speeches and sermons, along with some of his favorite hymns were woven throughout the celebration at JMHS. The Restoration Community Dance Ministry used gestures to evoke the emotions in "Use Me Lord," for example, and Caroline County Superintendent George Parker's short speech on how celebrating King's legacy for him has gone from seeking equality to striving for equity in education. There were also two rousing numbers sung by UBUMWE

Burundian Youth Choir in their native language that had the crowd tapping their toes and clapping along.

Punctuating the presentations were the three other Hidden Figures award recipients, all of whom received enthusiastic applause. They were Becky Reed, Grace Garnett Sprow and Jerine Mercer McConnell.

Reed, who'd been an attorney with Rappahannock Legal Services and a Stafford County supervisor, became an advocate for equal access to housing in the 1960s, Richardson said. She helped form the Hazel Hill Apartment Corporation to provide affordable housing in Fredericksburg, and access to health care for its residents by helping create the Hazel Hill Health Care Project. Both the apartment complex and the health care program are still in existence.

Sprow, a longtime Shiloh (Old Site) Baptist Church member, took part in a peaceful protest after the city said her class at Walker-Grant High School would have to use the back door to enter the publicly funded community center for its graduation ceremony. The class marched through the city streets in their caps and gowns to Shiloh (Old Site), which let the students hold the ceremony there. Sprow later went door to door in the fight to end the poll tax and other unfair practices that kept many blacks and poor whites from registering to vote, and was also one of the first parent volunteers at the Charles Street Mission School. It provided after-school programs, tutoring and early childhood education. She went on to work for Fredericksburg City Schools, and helped many Maury School students make the transition from segregated to desegregated schools.

McConnell, now the RN supervisor at Carriage Hill Nursing Home, was a rising senior at Walker-High School a decade after Sprow, but she, too, got involved in protests. She was captain of the cheerleading squad and a member of the NAACP Youth Council, and channeled her energy and leadership abilities into helping plan sit-ins in downtown Fredericksburg.

"She was a natural leader, who easily got others to follow," Richardson said. "Remember, if you will, that there were few cars back in 1960 and it was not an easy job to persuade teenagers to walk from Mayfield to downtown Fredericksburg in the summertime. But she managed to get them geared up and her courage was inspirational to them because at 4 feet, 10 inches and maybe 90 pounds, she had no fear whatsoever on the picket line. She became the poster child for courage. She would look discrimination in the face and dare it to look back at her—but always steeped in Dr. King's nonviolent tradition."

Today there's an historic marker on Caroline Street opposite the old Woolworth's building which includes a photo that shows showing McConnell holding a protest sign.

Sunday's ceremony ended with the honorees and everyone who'd ever been involved with the annual celebration being invited onstage to sing "We Shall Overcome" along with the audience.