

2013 – Diane Nash

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by Chris Seymour

Former Freedom Rider Offers Recollections of MLK

Former Freedom Rider Diane Nash visited Glastonbury Monday to celebrate a man- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.-and to emphasize a vision that was much larger than any one individual.

“History books and the media frequently portray the movement of the ‘60’s as Martin Luther King’s movement; it was not and this does not take anything away from Martin,” explained Nash on Monday evening at Smith Middle School, where she was the keynote speaker for the Glastonbury Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Initiative’s (GMLKCI) annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Celebration.

“I think he was a great man and I think his contribution was tremendous [but] Martin was not the leader; he was the spokesperson and a wonderful spokesperson he was,” she added.

What happened in the ‘60’s, however, was a “people movement,” she told the audience.”

Nash, 74, said she felt it was important for young people today to remember that. “It was a people’s movement,” she reiterated. “And the reason it’s important for people to understand that is when young people look around today and see things that need to be changed, sometimes they say, ‘I wish we had a great leader like Martin Luther King so this can get done.’ [But] if they understood it was a people’s movement, they’d say, ‘What can I do?’”

Nash touched on a variety of topics, including her personal recollections of King and the nonviolent strategy of the civil rights movement, during her entertaining, powerful and thought-provoking appearance at SMS Monday night.

“I have the distinction of being able to say that I have double-dated with Martin Luther King.” said Nash. “Martin was going to the Bahama Islands to work on one of his books and my former husband James Bevel and I went along with Coretta [Scott King] and Martin. And I have lovely memories of a lovely restaurant that was cut into the side of a hill and the moon shining through palm trees.” Dr. King as “fun to be with socially,” she added.

King, according to Nash, “had the best interests of black people, and indeed of all people, at heart. Although I used to have vigorous, unconstructive disagreements with him sometimes, always about strategy, I always knew we were on the same side.”

Nash also observed that King was “able to grow and change.”

She explained, “I saw over a period of years he would sometimes confront problems and sometimes he would really be stopped and stymied by those problems, but he was able to cope with the situation and over time rise to a new level and discover solutions.”

Nash said she was also impressed by King’s work ethic. “He worked very hard and efficiently; I was sometimes amazed by the amount of work he was able to grind out in a day.” she recalled.

A Chicago native, Nash got involved with the nonviolent movement in 1959 when she was a student at Fisk

University in Nashville. She served as chairperson of the first student sit-in movement in The Music City, which was the first southern city to desegregate its lunch counters in 1960.

“It was humiliating,” said Nash of the fact that blacks in Nashville could purchase food at restaurants but couldn’t sit down inside an establishment and eat what they had just bought.

Nash talked about how she and her colleagues in the civil rights movement were inspired by the nonviolent teachings of Gandhi.

“Gandhi developed a way where thousands and thousands of people...can focus and exert their love energy on their opponent instead of exerting violent energy in order to bring about desired social change,” she said. “So we needed a name for Gandhi’s way of exerting love energy.”

Instead of using the word “nonviolence” which she and other activists felt didn’t completely capture the essence of their movement, Nash came up with her own term, coining the phrase “agapic energy.” The term is derived from the word “agape,” which means “love that is spiritual in its nature.”

“Agapic energy is not just the absence of violence: it is the use of a power...agapic energy is not passive-it is active. Users of agapic energy are not pacifists-we are activists. Love energy, if properly applied, helps teach or heal the opponent or at least prevents the opponent from continuing to perpetrate the oppression.” said Nash.

During the Nashville sit-ins, Nash noted that people around the country were inspired by her group’s brand of civil disobedience.

“During the sit-ins people in parts of the country outside of the South cared that their fellow human beings, southern blacks, were being humiliated and unjustly discriminated against at lunch counters,” she said. “That motivated them to picket and refuse to shop at Woolworth and other offending chain stores in their own cities. So the energy of hundreds of thousands of people was focused and exerted on those corporations in order to right an injustice and the effort was a success.”

Nash also stressed that “oppression is a partnership between oppressed and oppressor.” She added, “The day blacks in Montgomery decided there’d no longer be segregated buses...there were no longer segregated buses in Montgomery.”

Some 50 years later, history looks back at the actions of the civil rights movement as heroic, and that seems especially appropriate considering the danger activists often put themselves in.

“There were a number of times that we knew if we continued marching a block or two away the highway patrol or police were waiting and there was a good chance someone would be seriously injured or killed,” recalled Nash.

“Sometimes people became so frightened that they really freaked out and more than once I saw that happen. [Then] the person standing next to the person who was upset would put their arm around their shoulder and say, ‘Remember, what we are doing is important; we are doing this for generations yet born.’”

Nash said that she and her colleagues in the civil rights movement “wanted to bring about the best society we could for you to be born into and come of age, and future generations are depending on you to do the same.”