

Kyles delivers King's message of hope

Friend of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. describes civil rights leader's last moments

By Jessica Walter, APR, DDC Public Affairs

The man who stood beside Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. when he was assassinated in 1968 delivered a stirring speech to the workforce of the Defense Distribution Center headquarters Jan. 17 in celebration of King's birthday.

Rev. Samuel "Billy" Kyles, the guest speaker for the event organized by DDC's Equal Employment Opportunity Office, repeatedly emphasized the importance of having dreams and aspirations.

"Dreamers – they're the ones who are not afraid to step outside the box," he said. "They're the ones who hear what others do not hear, see what others do not see, feel what others do not feel."

Kyles insisted we are all dreamers. Although we may sometimes lose sight of our dreams, each of us at some time has a dream to do something others think is impossible.

Citing examples of the skepticism encountered by inventors like Alexander Graham Bell and the Wright brothers, he explained how King's dream was foreign to most people.

He asked in an incredulous tone, "Believing that our children would be judged by the content of their character and not the color of their skin?"

He continued, "Dreaming that the sons and daughters of slaves and slave owners would sit down at the table of brotherhood?"

Despite naysayers, Kyle explained, King refused to give up on his dream.

"You must hold fast to your dream!" he shouted to the crowd.

As Kyles began to describe the last day of King's life, the crowd braced for what they knew would be an emotional

experience.

The night before he died, King had arrived in Memphis, Tenn., to lead a peaceful march in support of striking sanitation workers who were paid low wages and were required to suffer inhumane working conditions.

According to Kyles, King delivered a sermon at a local church in which he mentioned that he may not be able to see the situation through with the congregation. "It's as if he preached himself through the fear of death," Kyles described.

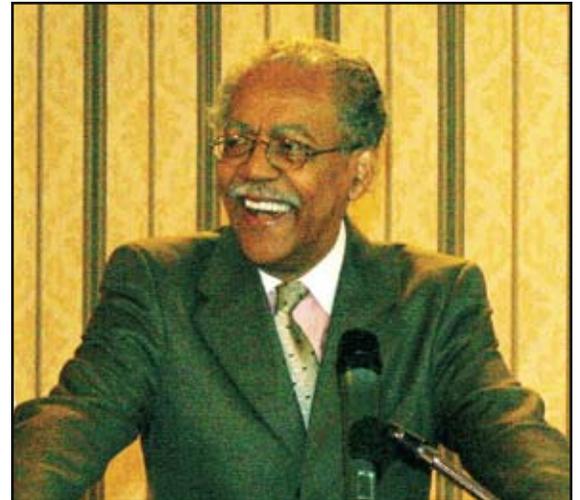
Kyles believed King somehow knew that his end was near. "He never thought he'd live to 40, and he died at 39," Kyles recalled.

The next day, Kyles went to King's hotel to pick him up for dinner. Kyles, along with King and Rev. Ralph Abernathy, spent time engaging in what Kyles described as "preacher talk" before they were beckoned to the balcony of King's room by a crowd of supporters gathered in the courtyard of the hotel. Rev. Jesse Jackson was among them, Kyles said.

Abernathy stayed in the room while Kyles walked with King toward the balcony. "I got about five steps and ka-pow!" Kyles exclaimed.

The shots had knocked King backward and he was lying on the floor. "There was blood everywhere," Kyles said softly.

Kyles described his attempts to save his friend. After he summoned police and asked them to send an ambulance, he tried to preserve the dignity of the man



In a moving sermon, Rev. Samuel "Billy" Kyles sent chills through the audience as he recounted the last moments of the life of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and pleaded with the group to hold tight to their dreams during the Defense Distribution Center's celebration of King's birthday.

whose life had changed the course of American history.

"I took the spread from the bed and covered him from the neck down. He never spoke a word," he said.

"I was doing what needed to be done, but I was not aware of doing it," said Kyles.

Four hours later, Kyles received the call he feared. The voice on the other end simply said, "We lost him."

As the crowd of DDC headquarters employees continued hanging on his every word, Kyles asked, "Why was I there at that moment?"

He answered, "Because crucifixions have to have witnesses."

He continued, "Martin King didn't die in some foolish way. He didn't overdose. He wasn't shot by a jealous lover. He wasn't shot leaving the scene of a crime.

"He was a man with a Ph.D. at 26 and the youngest Nobel Peace Prize recipient



Defense Distribution Center Chief of Staff Army Col. Perry Knight presented Rev. Samuel "Billy" Kyles with a plaque in appreciation for his participation in DDC's celebration of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. The event, which was held Jan. 17, was hosted by the Equal Employment Opportunity Office. Knight thanked Kyles for "opening a window of hope and inspiration" for those gathered.

at 35 with orator's skills off the chart. And he was on the balcony of a hotel in Memphis, Tenn., helping garbage workers realize their dream," he said in a soothingly rhythmic tone.

Kyles said the shooters wanted to see what would happen to King's dream if he died.

With rising intensity and a staccato delivery that culminated with a shout, he replied, "I will admit that you can kill

the dreamer, but I will hastily add you cannot kill the dream. The dream is still alive!"

Kyles has been a long-time leader in the civil rights movement and has been pastor of the Monumental Baptist Church in Memphis, Tenn., since 1959. He is a founding member of the National Board of People United to Save Humanity and was appointed by President Clinton to serve on the advisory committee on

religious freedom. Kyles also worked on the presidential campaigns of Rev. Jesse Jackson in 1984 and 1988 and was a delegate to the First African National Congress. He received the Tennessee Living Legend Award in 1992.

The King celebration was hosted by the DDC Equal Employment Opportunity Office and coordinated by Columbus Dolberry, DDC's African American Employment program manager.