

## Early honored for being first black to earn a degree at UGA

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Mary Frances Early was so happy Monday morning that she burst into song.



Mary Frances Early meets J.J. Harris Elementary School student Keshundra Glenn on Monday during a reception at J.J. Harris in Early's honor. (Kelly Wegel)

"What the world needs now, is love, sweet love. That's the only thing there's just too little of," Early sang in her clear, sweet voice - right in the middle of her speech to more than 500 people attending the annual Freedom Breakfast at the University of Georgia's Tate Student Center.

**See more photos from the breakfast.**

Early, UGA's first black graduate, gave the keynote address Tuesday morning, then spent part of the afternoon at J.J. Harris Elementary School for a community reception in her honor - where she explained why she sang.

"I didn't plan to sing that little portion of the song," said Early, who enrolled as UGA's first black graduate student in 1961 and was the first black person to graduate from the university when she earned her master's degree in music education in 1962.

But, she said, "I was so emotional. I thought singing would express my emotions better than speaking."

The Freedom Breakfast - sponsored by UGA, the Athens-Clarke government and the Clarke County School District - honors the work of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. and is one of the events commemorating the 50th anniversary of UGA's desegregation.

Early had a long and distinguished career in music education after graduating from UGA - as a teacher and administrator for 37 years in the Atlanta public school system, and later as head of the music department at Clark Atlanta University.

She said she was happy Monday because of the honor and recognition she got as a pioneer in the desegregation of the university. But she also was sad as she thought of King, whom she knew, and how his life ended too soon, cut short by an assassin's bullet.

"This has been a most extraordinary day for me," she said. "It took 38 years for the University of Georgia to even recognize I was here, but Lord, since they started, it's like fast-forward."

In her morning talk, Early recalled a time when UGA was not so welcoming.

Just days after the university's first two black students, Hamilton Holmes and Charlayne Hunter (now Hunter-Gault) set foot on campus, Early decided to support them by transferring to UGA from graduate school at the University of Michigan.

Michigan took five days to approve Early's application; at UGA, it took five months, she said.

And when Early began her studies in June 1961, she was the only black student - Holmes and Hunter had gone home to Atlanta for summer vacation.

At one point that summer, a group of jeering students - young white men - threw rocks at her, Early said. When one of the rocks hit her in the shoulder, she threw it back at them.

Later, embarrassed, she told King.

"I probably would have done the same thing," King told her.

Early tried even harder after that to act as King taught, with love and without violence.

"I never did it again," she said.

But she faced more trials. When Early and other members of the UGA Chorus gave a summer concert, Early's family was not allowed to attend the performance - a federal judge ordered UGA's classes desegregated, but the order did not apply to audiences in concerts, university officials told her.

"We have come a long way since 1961," Early marveled. "You have done a superb job and have brought the University of Georgia closer to the American dream."

But UGA and the nation still haven't fulfilled King's vision, she said.

"It is our challenge - no, our responsibility - to make the dream a complete reality," she said.

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