

Aaron recalls day of King's death in Friday talk

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Published Saturday, January 14 ,2012



Billye Aaron, the wife of baseball legend Hank Aaron, speaks to a large crowd gathered at the Tate Student Center on the University of Georgia campus for the annual Martin Luther King Jr. Freedom Breakfast on Friday, Jan. 13, 2012 in Athens, Ga. (Athens Banner-Herald, Richard Hamm/Staff)

The wife of legendary slugger Hank Aaron recalled Friday the grief people felt the day Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated.

“I felt as if the world had come to an end,” said Billye Aaron, the keynote speaker at Athens’ annual Martin Luther King Jr. Freedom Breakfast held at the University of Georgia. The Martin Luther King Jr. national holiday is Monday; born Jan. 15, 1929, he was assassinated on April 4, 1968.

Aaron has been married to baseball great Hank Aaron since 1973, but before she was widowed in 1970, her husband was Atlanta civil rights leader Samuel W. Williams, who helped desegregate the University of Georgia.

She and Williams were friends of the Kings, and rushed to King's house in Atlanta as soon as they heard on NBC's Huntley-Brinkley report that King had been shot, she said. King's children ran to the door; inside, King's wife, Coretta Scott King, was packing to go to Memphis, where King had been shot.

Shortly afterward, Aaron went to the Atlanta airport with a group that included Coretta Scott King, a policeman and Ivan Allen, Atlanta's mayor. At the airport, Allen looked at her and shook his head, indicating King had died.

"That was the first signal to me that Martin Luther King Jr. was dead. It was an eerie, painful feeling. In fact, the pain was just enormous, so enormous it was painful to breathe," King said.

But more than 40 years later, King's ideas and ideals have spread around the world, including to the University of Georgia campus, Aaron said as she looked out at the crowd of nearly 600 people.

"Martin was the quintessential prophet of the 20th century," she said. "Martin ignited a flame that will burn in perpetuity."

The racially diverse crowd was evidence that King made headway in his quest for the ideals of equality, justice and understanding, said Aaron, a former teacher and the first African-American talk show host in the Southeast.

"I never expected to be standing here," she said, recalling the struggle to desegregate UGA more than 50 years ago.

Aaron also saluted three people who received "Fulfilling the Dream" awards bestowed at the Freedom Breakfast, which is coordinated by UGA and sponsored by the Clarke County School District, the Athens-Clarke County Unified Government and six corporate sponsors.

This year's awards went to UGA education professor Corey Johnson, known for his work to prevent bullying of gay, bisexual and transgender youth; Roberta Gardner, a graduate student in language and literacy education who promotes culturally diverse children's literature; and Attawa Childres, a UGA retiree who remains active in many volunteer activities in the Athens community.