



Video Story Transcript

Martin and Me

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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d-gKc2Riq2g>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hi, I'm Stephen Hobbs. I'd like to share a part of a story about growing up in Bridgewater, New Jersey. Right down the highway from Newark. In the 1960s, at a time when there was great political, cultural racial and social changes.

I blame it on James Brown. In 1967, he came out with a song, "Say it Loud! I'm Black and I'm Proud!" That could have been the theme song for the black consciousness movement of the 60s. When we black people were really in love with the color of our skin. We grew our hair out afro style and we wore dashikis from the motherland. But was I really ready to jump fully into the black consciousness movement? I mean, they were talking about revolution. Already people were frustrated with the slow progress. Even with Dr. King's great movement of nonviolent resistance. Cities like New York and Cleveland and Detroit erupted in flames of riots during the 1967 summer.

But, as a young teenager, I was involved in community development work. I was a member of a civic organization called The Somerville Manor Youth Association. Somerville Manor was the black neighborhood that I grew up in. It was the only black community in Bridgewater. We advocated for sewer lines and water lines in our community. Most of us, most of the families, had outhouses and some even had wells outside and they used to have to work with hand-pump. We also tried to get trash collection and a place for us to play. But was I really ready for that liberation stuff? I mean, how could I be a radical? My grandmother didn't like that term. She thought, she thought, one summer when I grew out a beard, she wouldn't let me into her house because I looked too much like those militants in her, in her our community. And I always wanted to please my grandmother and be a good boy.

Still some of my black friends thought I was trying to act white. Like I was not black enough. Whatever that means. I mean, was it mean, I was an Oreo or because I had too many friends like my buddy, Lougoo Gueotto, who was Italian kid who lived up the street from me? It probably didn't help my cause, the fact that I had a white girlfriend named Elizabeth, with her beautiful blue eyes. In the fall of 1967, I entered high school. And I was elected freshman class president, which is a pretty good thing, considering of the twelve hundred students in my high school, only 26 were black. And I got good grades and made the honor roll.

But still that militancy stuff really got me worried. And then, on April 4th, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis. Oh, President Lyndon Johnson asked for calm throughout the country. But the voices of anger, rippled across the land. "No justice, no peace! No justice, no peace!" And cities all across America erupted in riots and flames. We kids and some of old men are still around street corners wondering what we should do. Somebody suggested we should go to the nearby mall and trash some of those stores. But at a meeting of the Somerville Manor Youth Association, it was decided that we would boycott school the day after Dr. King's funeral. Well, I was at the meeting but I really wasn't feeling it. Skip school? What would my grandmother say?

Well, the day of the boycott I went to school, in part, because as freshman class president, I was invited to participate in an in-school memorial service for Dr. King. Speaking to the entire student body over the intercom, I read a poem that I had composed in memory of Dr. King the night before. The poem went like this:

It's not how long you live, it's how well.

Did you give forth your best effort every day?

It's not how long you live but how well.

Did you travel along the honest way?

It's not how long you live but how well.

Did you lend a hand to another?

It's not how long you live but how well.

Did you love all of your brothers?

It's not how long you live but how well.

After that, Somerville Manor Youth Association met quite a bit. We talked about our dreams and what our positive response would be. We decided that we would build a youth center where we would have recreational activities and afterschool programs. And a place where we can get mentoring for college and career planning. And, most importantly, we would build it ourselves. We would raise the money. And we, we had car washes and fish fries and barbecues. Someone came up with the idea of having a musical review. We called it *The Soul Show*. In which everyone would participate if they could, playing Motown music. People who can sing or dance or play instruments, auditioned. I couldn't sing and I didn't have any rhythm, so I didn't get a part in the show. I had to watch from the sidelines. But the show was successful nonetheless. It raised a number, a bit of money, and more importantly, we raised some friends. Our minister Reverend Hodge, he

started inviting white clergy to our meetings. And soon we were telling our story at some of those, those pastors' churches, getting more support.

Then we, we figured we could organize a nonprofit corporation to build the center. At the first official meeting of the nonprofit, I didn't want to go because it was at the Plukemin Presbyterian Church and I guess my tail feathers were still a little ruffled about not being in the Soul Show. But my girlfriend, Elizabeth, encouraged me to go. And I was elected youth representative for the Executive Board. Oh, we had dozens and dozens of meetings. And I worked closely with the president of the organization, Mr. Richard Theale, a white lawyer who inspired me and showed me how lawyers could use their skills to work for social justice.

By the time I left to go to college in the fall of 1971, the plans had already been made. The architectural drawings rendered and the construction schedule set for the spring of 1972. By the fall of '72, the doors of the youth center opened with volunteer programs for the kids in the area. On April 8th, 1973, we have the official dedication ceremony of the Martin Luther King Youth Center. I was asked to speak and I read the poem I had written five years earlier. Someone read a letter from Mrs. Coretta Scott King. We had a crowd there of people from 23 churches and synagogues in the area. It truly was the embodiment of the vision Dr. King had in his dream of blacks and whites, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Christians, holding hands, singing the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!" Now *that* was revolutionary.