

Remembering the 30th Anniversary March on Washington at the 60th

A Participant Who Stood Out Then and Stands Out Today

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In the afternoon of August 28th, 1993, the humidity and heat were overwhelming. I had spent the morning photographing on assignment for the United Autoworkers (UAW) for its magazine, *Solidarity*. From around the country, autoworkers were attending the 30th anniversary of the *I Have Dream* speech that Martin Luther King gave on August 23rd, 1963, from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, a speech that galvanized the Civil Rights Movement.

Among the photos that I took that day at the 1993 commemoration of the speech was one of a quite striking woman, Raymona Middleton, a third generation Washingtonian who in 1963, at the tender age of 13, had begged her mother to let her attend the march to hear King speak. Recently, when going through an early correspondence file, I came across the letter Ms. Middleton wrote to me in December of 1993 after I sent her pictures, I had taken of her at the 30th anniversary. Her letter described that day in 1963 to me, "My mother, expecting trouble, forbade me to attend. No amount of pouting or tears changed my mother's mind. I had to stay home watching it all on television."

Later telling of her motivation to be present at the first march, "I, like millions of Americans, even as a young teenager, had seen on TV the horrific violence throughout Alabama, Mississippi, and other parts of the Deep South towards African Americans! Some of these TV broadcasts showed police attack dogs and local firefighters using water hoses on the marchers, people being dragged through the streets like trash. So by age 14 I had an awareness of severe racism towards people who looked like me. I remember what happened when police, and state troopers killed and severely injured not just black folks, but many white students who had emerged from the North to travel south encouraging Voting Rights. In 1965, two years after the original MLK March on Washington the violence continued towards Lutheran Clergy, Jewish Rabbis, and Catholic Priests during the March from Selma to Montgomery, better known to me as "Bloody Sunday."



Finding Raymona Middleton's letter to me written in December 1993 inspired me to try to locate her this past spring. After three decades, I was able to find her current phone number and gave her a call. She quickly recalled that day in 1993 at the Lincoln Memorial and the photos that I had taken of her. She told me that she had saved the page in UAW Solidarity Magazine that featured her photo, and had framed and hung it in her home, where it still hangs.

I learned that the original photos I had sent her long ago had been lost during a move, and so I arranged to make a home visit to give her replacements.

I also asked Raymona if I could update her portrait while she held some of the photographs, I had taken of her during the August 28th, 1993, 30th Anniversary March.

I wanted to show that her life still stands out today.

Raymona Middleton is a woman of faith who has imbued her life with social purpose - often she has been inspired by the pastors at her church, Rev. Dr. Grainger Browning and Rev. Dr. JoAnn Browning. It took two weeks before we could arrange a convenient time for me to stop by her home in Charles County, Maryland. During that time, I began to get a clearer idea of all the socially useful work continues to occupy her time these days.



Raynette Middleton, 20th Anniversary March on Washington 1998

San Dallas 1998



Finally, late this past May, after she had spent a day as part of an Outreach Team of women from her church with patients at DaVita Dialysis in Oxon Hill, Maryland, did we arrange a morning for me to visit. Sitting on her airy front porch she explained how she had read Bible verses and recited poetry from her original poem collection to the patients. Raymona's readings were well received by dialysis patients like Shawn Gibson who is suffering from failing eyesight. In 1984 Ms. Middleton became a member of the Ebenezer AME Church in Oxen Hill, Maryland. Her church had moved in 1983 from Georgetown in Washington, DC to Maryland with 17 original members and over time it has grown to be a congregation of over 8,000 today.

Asking about her family, Ms. Middleton recounted how her Dad, Raymond survived the Normandy Beach German gunfire as the Allies invaded Europe during World War II. But he came back home a mentally wounded warrior – due to the woes of a bloody war and the harshness of racism within his own ranks. He tried to deaden the pain with alcohol. Once home he maintained employment as a bricklayer. After the sufferings of an abusive marriage, Raymona's mother, Margaret gathered her two daughters and moved back to her parent's home in Washington, DC. "My Dad, like many Vets still today, signed the papers, he put on the uniform, and he risked his life for his country.....but then got no help from the Veterans Administration. Like so many others his sufferings from war were real, I wanted to honor him and his service to our country at the 30th Anniversary MLK March that I finally was able to attend."

As an adult, Ms. Middleton became a Federal Civil Servant at the GSA level in multiple agencies, the last of which was the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT), retiring in 2005 after 33 years. She mentioned, in an aside, while she was working at the U.S. Department of Interior, that she made use of her fifteen-minute morning coffee breaks distributing her homemade sandwiches to the homeless encamped near that government building.

Sitting on her front porch on a pleasant side street, I asked about the colorfully painted cowboy boots displayed on the porch next to her. Raymona explained, after retirement she moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico for a time. The decorated boots are a remembrance to enjoyable years there, but when the pandemic hit she felt the need to return home to Maryland. Out West she had developed an appreciation for the African-American's who had made their way there during the Great Migration that began after the Civil War, some forming Black townships, and becoming cowboys, and horse trainers.

That conversation led Raymona to convey some of her own family genealogical history. That research on Ancestry and Family Search revealed her Maternal Great, Great, Great Grandparents, Jacob Richardson, born enslaved in 1795 with his wife, Mariah born in 1837, were both emancipated in Queen Anne County, Maryland, according to the 1860 Census -SCHEDULE 1-(for) Free Inhabitants. Her Paternal Great-Great Grandparents, John Alexander, was born in 1801 with his wife Hannah Alexander, born in 1805, in the 54th District, Russell County, Virginia, in the 1850 Census -SCHEDULE 1- (and were listed as) Free Inhabitants - Mulatto Farmers.

In Raymona Middleton's recent words, "I believe that Dr. King, like most of us, would be discouraged by the current political status of our country. Back in January 2014, I decided to have DNA testing. To my surprise, the outcome was that I'm a total mix of everybody: (I'm 90%-African, 1%-Native American, 1%-Asian, 7%-European [Irish/Finish/Iberian], 1%-Caucasian = 100%). Most importantly, I am a true American, and I'll tell you why.... from both my maternal and paternal grandfathers to my own father as well as my son Robert have all fought in the military to protect and defend these United States of America. I am still searching, but yet to find supporting documents of a Civil War Patriot in my lineage. I am a descendant of former slaves who helped build this great country of ours, and feel that their blood, sweat, and tears are still crying out from the ground we walk on for equality and justice for all!



Raymona is holding her Selma March era civil rights poster that aptly describes her own life of activism. Next to her are the pair of cowboy boots she decorated to remember her good experience living in Albuquerque, New Mexico. But as the Pandemic hit, she felt the need to return home to Maryland. On the right, Ms. Middleton gave the dialysis patient, Shawn Gibson, who has suffered vision loss a set of Bible CDs after they got acquainted while Ms. Gibson was receiving treatment at the clinic

Photo of Shawn Gibson courtesy of DaVita Dialysis, Oxen Hill, Maryland



“For over 400 hundred years of being bought and sold like furniture, my ancestors toiled in inhuman conditions, building the White House brick by brick and serving within it, to becoming the human engine of our nation’s economy, growing and harvesting cotton, tobacco, and rice, a 'direct source' of vast riches still being inherited by others today. Like Dr. Martin Luther King, and those who marched with him, I still have his same Dream today, sixty years later!”

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