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MLK Celebration 2022

Martin Luther King Jr, William J. Durham, and the Importance of Education

I would first like to thank Austin College, The MLK Planning Committee, the Grayson County NAACP Branch, the Grayson County and Sherman Rotary Clubs, and everyone who contributed to organizing this fantastic event for allowing me to honor the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr and speak on the topic of education. I was thrilled when I was given the opportunity to speak at this year's MLK Celebration as diversity, equality, freedom, and inclusion – values that Dr. King has espoused – are values that I am incredibly passionate about. I am so happy to be a part of celebrating one of the most impactful civil and human rights activists that our world has seen. As a political science major and Pre-Law student here at Austin College, I wanted to incorporate the study of law and political science into my speech. Although I initially had many ideas on ways to do this, I struggled to settle on one topic. However, after learning about activist and lawyer William J. Durham and being inspired by his legal career in one of my courses, I knew that I wanted to highlight him in my speech.

William J. Durham, born in 1896, was a groundbreaking Black attorney and activist whose legacy I feel is often overlooked and left unacknowledged. Before my time here at Austin College, I had not learned about this significant figure. Durham was a WWI veteran and practicing attorney whose legal practice centered around issues of civil rights and discrimination. In addition to his activism, I was drawn to Durham and felt it was necessary to specifically recognize him in my speech today because he was at one point a member of the Grayson County community. After briefly attending a university in Kansas and serving in WWI, Durham studied

law under a white Sherman attorney named Ben Gafford. After passing the bar exam, Durham established his own law office in the city of Sherman. Despite living in an era where obtaining a formal education was extremely difficult for African Americans, facing immense racism and the destruction of his law office due to racial violence, Durham worked on some of the most groundbreaking court cases in American history.

Continuing the theme of education, one of the most notable court cases that Durham worked on was the Sweatt v. Painter court case of 1950, which led to the desegregation of the University of Texas at Austin's Law School. This case involved Heman Sweatt, an aspiring law student whose application to UT's Law School was rejected because he was African American. In this case, Durham and his co-counsel, Thurgood Marshall, successfully argued that denying black law students' admission to this university solely because of the color of their skin violated the 14th Amendment's equal protection clause. Durham and Marshall directly challenged the "separate but equal" doctrine, which had long been used to legalize segregation. The Supreme Court first established this legal doctrine in the Plessy v. Ferguson court case of 1896, which deemed racial segregation constitutional as long as the facilities and institutions available to black and white people were equal. However, in the Sweatt v. Painter case, the Supreme Court agreed with the tactful argument presented by Durham and his co-counsel that the segregationist practices of UT Austin's Law school were unconstitutional and that the educational institutions available to Black students were not equal to those available to White students. Furthermore, this court case is significant and groundbreaking because it laid the legal foundation for Brown v. Board of Education. This 1954 court case struck down the separate but equal doctrine in its entirety and resulted in the integration of the public school system in the U.S.

Interestingly, I am currently taking a course where I had the opportunity to walk in front of what used to be Durham's home in Downtown Sherman on East Brocket. As an aspiring Black attorney, walking past the home where one of the most impactful black attorneys worked on legal arguments for transformative integration court cases was incredibly inspiring. I have the opportunity to speak before you today due to the activism and legal career of William J. Durham. Without heroes like Durham, other students of color and I would not have the educational opportunities and the access to educational institutions that we have today. Through his activism and legal practice, Durham was working to create a more equitable and inclusive world that Martin Luther King Jr. espoused in his activism.

As a student at Morehouse University, an HBCU in Atlanta, Georgia, Dr. King published an article for his university's paper titled "The Purpose of Education." In this article, published in 1947, three years before the Sweatt v. Painter court case, Dr. King stressed the immense importance of education, particularly the ways in which obtaining a quality education equips individuals with tools needed to overcome and dismantle oppressive systems. There is one quote King wrote in this article that I feel is incredibly insightful and relevant in today's world. King wrote that "to save man from the morass of propaganda... is one of the chief aims of education. Education must enable one to sift and weigh evidence, to discern the true from the false, the real from the unreal, and the facts from the fiction." In an era of heightened political tension where misinformation and disinformation are rampantly propagated, Dr. King's quote serves as a reminder that obtaining a quality education in which one develops critical thinking skills is an integral part of being able to differentiate falsehoods from reality. I hope this is a skill that we can all develop and strengthen as we embark on our educational journeys. Furthermore, during the ongoing integration of public schools, in his 1967 speech titled "Where Do We Go From

Here,” Dr. King was quoted as saying, “let us be dissatisfied until the dark yesterdays of segregated schools will be transformed into bright tomorrows of quality integrated education.”

Here, Dr. King is looking optimistically towards the integration of the public school system and is urging his audience to remain dissatisfied until quality integrated education is achieved.

The word “quality” in this quote is incredibly important because although we have made exponential progress in terms of reducing racial inequalities in public education and improving access to education across racial lines, largely thanks to individuals such as William J Durham, Thurgood Marshall, and Dr. King, there are persisting racial disparities in education quality. Research has shown that students of color in low-income communities often attend schools with low levels of funding and that lack vital resources, including counseling staff, college readiness courses, and adequate and updated classroom equipment and materials. These disparities put these students at a disadvantage which worsens social inequality. Harkening back to Dr. King’s 1967 quote, there are persisting racial and socioeconomic disparities in education that we should be “dissatisfied” with.

I hope that we as students can look at the legacies of civil rights heroes like Dr. King and Durham and see the role that education has played in their lives and activism. Despite not receiving a formal law school education, Durham was able to pass the bar exam, establish his own law office, and work on some of the most noteworthy Supreme Court cases in U.S history. Durham’s hands-on legal experience allowed him to write some of the most impactful legal arguments that have led to the expansion of students of colors’ access to quality education. Furthermore, Dr. King understood the immense power that obtaining a quality education equipped people with. Additionally, during his educational journey, Dr. King discovered practices such as civil disobedience from authors like Henry David Thoreau and non-violent

resistance strategies from Indian activist Gandhi, which were the heart of his non-violent protest approach during the Civil Rights movement. The education that Dr. King acquired allowed him to write and deliver some of the most moving and influential speeches in American history. With education, Dr. King shed light on injustices, changed hearts and minds, and inspired generations. In closing, I hope that learning about the legacies of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and William Durham, who was at one point a member of Grayson County, and the role that education has played in their lives and activism will inspire us all as students to go out into the world, incite change, and close the educational disparities that we see in our communities.