



Me and Mrs. King

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January 16, 2024 By [Paul Kawata](#)

In 1992, I met Mrs. Coretta Scott King as a tongue-tied, nervous activist who desperately needed her support. Not only was she my hero and an icon to the world, but she was also critical to our efforts to expand HIV/AIDS from being viewed as a white gay men's disease into the civil rights issue it has always been. I'm sharing this story on this MLK Day because the struggle in 2024 is real.

There was a lot resting on our first meeting with Mrs. King. NMAC and our movement needed her voice to highlight how Black gay men and Black women were hurt by HIV and the related stigma surrounding the virus. Mrs. King was in the unique position to build a critical bridge between the Black community and the AIDS movement. She could reach people who thought HIV was mostly impacting white gay men.

Thankfully, she was as gracious as you would imagine. Fully briefed on the community's urgent need, and undeterred by the challenges of adding her voice to the discussion. She understood that some church leaders would be displeased. She uniquely understood that our work was about justice and equality; that was something she could support.

NMAC remains fortunate to have had her speak at two events. The first was the opening reception for the United States Conference on AIDS (USCA) in Atlanta. She headlined a reception titled "Civil Rights Leaders Salute the HIV Movement." The event was at Atlanta's City Hall and included civil rights icon and then head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Dr. Joseph Lowrey. It was historic to see these legendary civil rights icons in the same room as leaders from the HIV movement.

The second time Mrs. King spoke was at the HIV Prevention Leadership Summit (HPLS) sponsored by CDC, AED, NASTAD, and NMAC. Walking her back to her car after her speech, I don't know what came over me, but I reached out to hug her. That is when she whispered into my ear, "Remember, you are carrying on Martin's dream."

Our fight for dignity and equality has never been more important or more at risk. I will always remember that moment when Mrs. King held my hand as it shook out of control. I share her words because the 2024 election will be another defining moment. The outcome of the elections could change everything. Let's channel MLK's dream and her gracious spirit by getting everyone to vote.

Yours in the struggle,

Paul Kawata

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