

LET FREEDOM RING

Fifty years ago, more than 250,000 people marched on Washington, D.C., to demand an end to racial segregation.

At 10 p.m. on August 18, 1963, three black teens left their hometown of Gadsden, Alabama, and started walking north along U.S. Highway 11. With their parents' reluctant support, Robert Avery, 15; James Foster Smith, 16; and Frank Thomas, 17, set out on a 684-mile trip to the nation's capital. The Carver High School students were on their way to the March on Washington to demand equal rights for blacks.

The teens had been involved in **civil rights** protests throughout the summer, boycotting local

WORDS TO KNOW

- **civil rights** (*n*): guarantees of freedom and equal treatment under the law
- **sit-in** (*n*): a protest in which people seat themselves somewhere and refuse to move until their demands are met
- **Jim Crow** (*adj*): referring to laws and practices that discriminated against blacks

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businesses that discriminated against blacks and staging **sit-ins** at segregated lunch counters. So when they heard about plans for the March on Washington, they knew they had to be there.

"We wanted to go, but we couldn't afford to . . . ride the bus," recalls Avery, "so we hitchhiked."

Despite the dangers young African-Americans faced hitchhiking through the South in 1963, Avery says the people who picked them up—mostly whites—were friendly and supportive.

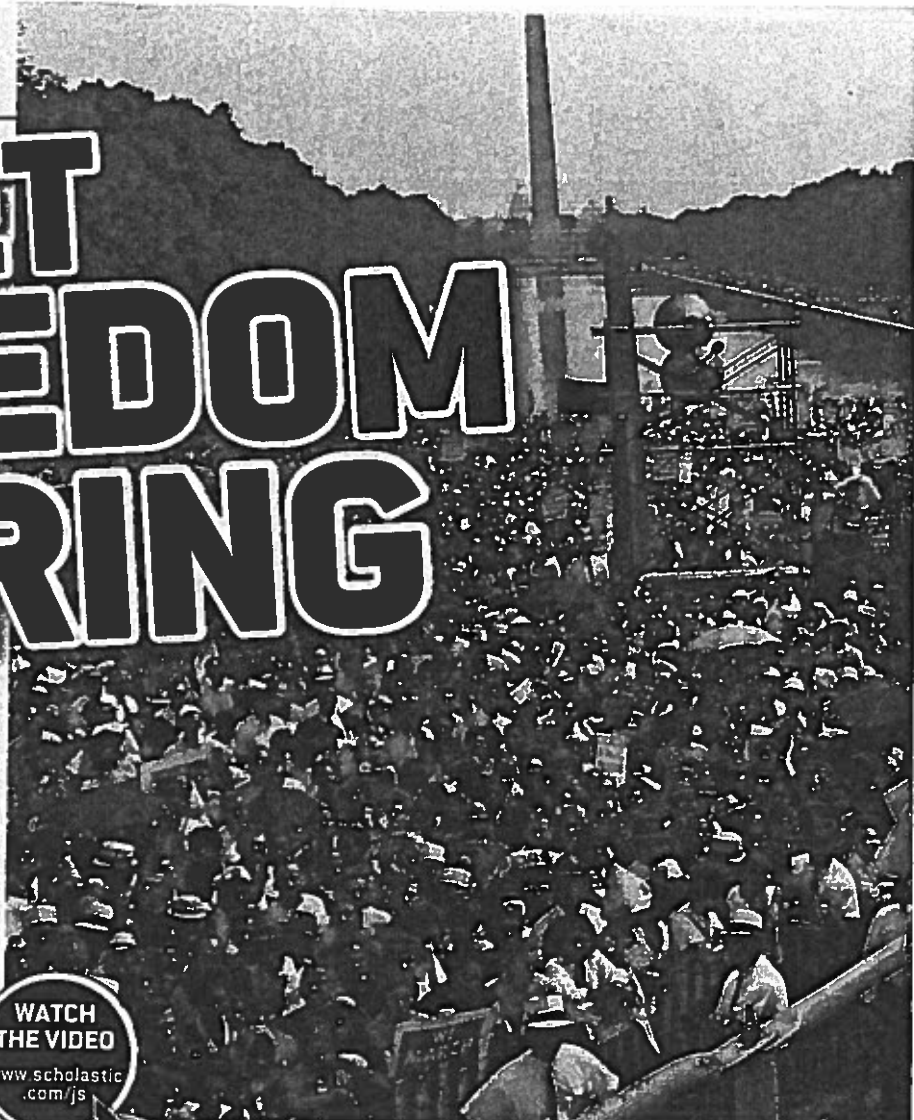
It took three days for the teens to finally reach Washington, D.C. When they arrived, they helped set up for the march by making signs. A week later, on August 28, more

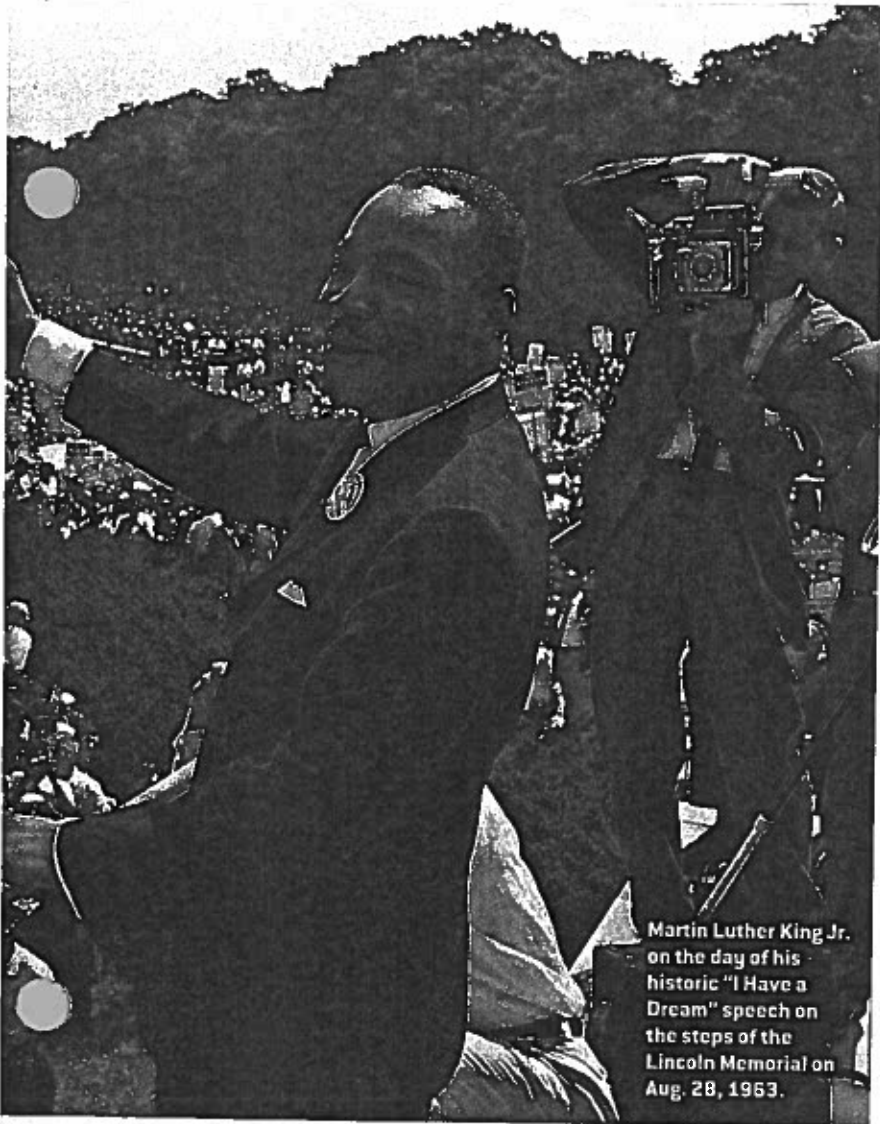
than a quarter of a million people crammed onto the National Mall for what would become the largest civil rights rally in U.S. history.

A Decade of Protest

Growing up in Alabama, the boys encountered segregation on a daily basis. Avery remembers seeing whites-only water fountains around Gadsden and not being allowed to eat at some restaurants. Even though the Supreme Court had ruled in 1954 that segregated public schools were unconstitutional, segregation remained a way of life in parts of the U.S., particularly in the South, where **Jim Crow** laws and customs prevailed.

One of the centers of the civil





Martin Luther King Jr. on the day of his historic "I Have a Dream" speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on Aug. 28, 1963.

rights movement was Birmingham, Alabama, an hour from where Avery and his friends grew up. Under the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr.—a young Baptist minister—thousands took part in nonviolent protests in Birmingham.

But in May 1963, the demonstrations became violent as police turned dogs and high-pressure water hoses on peaceful protesters. They arrested thousands of black youths—some as young as 4 years old. Graphic news photos of the encounter shocked the nation and helped gain support for civil rights.

Soon after, King joined A. Philip Randolph and other civil rights leaders in planning the March on Washington. They wanted

Congress to enact legislation to address the economic hardships facing African-Americans. In 1963, the unemployment rate for blacks was nearly twice that for whites.

Despite President John F. Kennedy's declaration of support for civil rights, little progress had been made to end segregation in the first two years of his presidency. But on June 11, spurred in part by the events in Birmingham and pressure from civil rights activists, Kennedy addressed the nation, announcing his plans for a civil rights bill.

As Congress fiercely debated the bill, plans for the march intensified. At first, Kennedy refused to support the rally, fearing that it would become violent and prevent

"Even though he was talking to a crowd, he made it sound like he was talking [directly] to you." —Robert Avery

the passage of his bill. But he reluctantly agreed to support it, realizing that it would take place with or without his approval.

The Day of the March

On the morning of the march, more than 250,000 people from all over the country assembled near the Washington Monument. Soon, the crowd began the one-mile walk to the Lincoln Memorial. As they marched, they held hands and sang freedom songs.

TV networks interrupted their normal programming to broadcast the events. Randolph spoke first, followed by Eugene Carson Blake, a white minister, and 23-year-old John Lewis (now a Congressman from Georgia) of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee.

The tenth and final speaker was King. On the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, he outlined his vision for equality. "I have a dream," he told the crowd, "that one day this nation will rise up [and] live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

King's message of peace and freedom resonated with the crowd in the capital as well as millions

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who watched from home. King's 16-minute "I Have a Dream" speech is considered one of the most powerful in U.S. history.

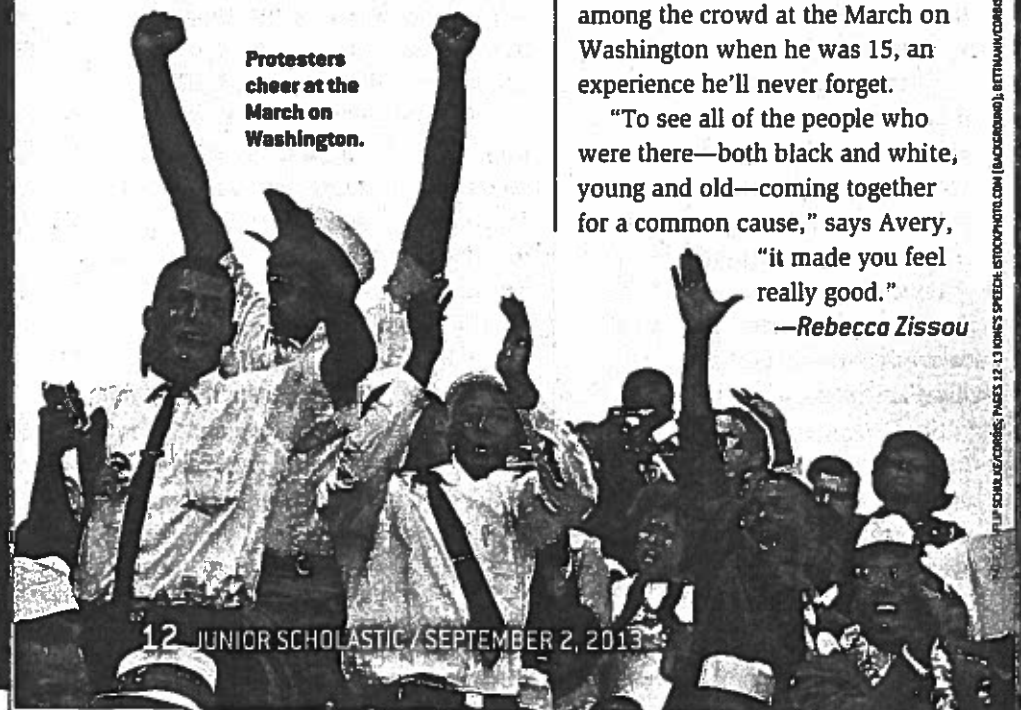
King helped Americans understand the injustices of segregation, says Julian Bond, a history professor at American University in Washington, D.C. "It was a great speech, and the occasion made it even more important," says Bond, who was 23 when he attended the march. "King explained the justice of the movement's demands . . . in marvelous language that anyone could understand."

Avery remembers being inspired by King's words. "Even though he was talking to a crowd, he made it sound like he was talking [directly] to you," he says.

As the march ended, the crowd joined together to sing "We Shall Overcome," the unofficial anthem of the civil rights movement.

The protest was "a moment of achievement," Bond tells *JS*. "A demonstration that black Americans—and their white supporters—were serious in their demands for freedom and . . . were willing to sacrifice for it."

Protesters cheer at the March on Washington.



The March's Legacy

President Kennedy was assassinated three months after the march. The next year, his successor, President Lyndon B. Johnson, signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which legally ended segregation in public facilities, such as hotels and stores. In 1965, Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act, outlawing obstacles to black voter registration.

On April 4, 1968, King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. His death unleashed a wave of sorrow, as the world mourned the loss of a great leader. In 2011, a monument in King's honor was unveiled on the National Mall, just steps from where he delivered his most famous speech in 1963.

Avery, now a city council member in Gadsden, is often reminded of how far the nation has come in the past 50 years. He returned to the capital in 2009 to witness an event that many people involved in the civil rights movement hadn't thought possible—the inauguration of the nation's first African-American president, Barack Obama. For Avery, Obama's swearing-in reminded him of standing among the crowd at the March on Washington when he was 15, an experience he'll never forget.

"To see all of the people who were there—both black and white, young and old—coming together for a common cause," says Avery,

"it made you feel really good."

—Rebecca Zissou