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Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. 50th Anniversary Celebration Speech

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Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Speech
50th Anniversary Celebration
Dr. John M. Dunn
12/2/13

- Good afternoon and welcome. Thank you for being here to celebrate, reflect and draw new inspiration from an event that happened 50 years ago this month. If those audio passages we just heard didn't cause a few chills, I'm not sure what would.
- Fifty years ago--Dec. 18, 2013--this was a very young university. Just six years earlier, the state had designated Western Michigan University as its fourth great university. Our enrollment was roughly half what it is today, but it was growing at phenomenal levels--10 to 15 percent annually. The university had a relatively new president, Dr. James W. Miller, who took office in 1961.
- Despite the upheaval of the 1960s and WMU's relatively new status as a university, the 1963-64 year was a time for this institution to set an example for the rest of higher education and show what it truly means to be a University and allow students to experience the marketplace of ideas.
- Early in the fall 1963 semester, the senior class invited "newsmakers" to campus to speak to the student body. One accepted--Gov. Ross Barnett, the arch segregationist who was Mississippi's sitting governor. The fact that he was coming to campus to speak drew outrage from, among others, Michigan Gov. George Romney and the NAACP. A speech by Barnett to the American Bar Association in Ann Arbor had already been scrapped.
- President James Miller resisted calls to cancel Barnett's speech, maintaining that a University community needed to hear all sides of an issue--no matter how

distasteful some opinions are. It was, he reasoned, what we now call a teachable moment. Barnett spoke--receiving his largest round of applause when he noted his term as governor was almost over. Three months later, President Miller stood in Read Fieldhouse to welcome the person who could present the most powerful antidote to Barnett's words.

- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was invited to campus as part of a lecture symposium series sponsored by the Lee Honors College and called "Conscience of America." That symposium was triggered by the Barnett speech. Instead of Barnett's message of hatred, King came to speak about "Social Justice" at the behest of the Western Student Association—then called the student council—and the Lee Honors College.

- President Miller proudly introduced Dr. King (He had chosen not to introduce Barnett). In his introduction of Dr. King, President Miller spoke about the importance of hearing multiple points of view and arriving at one's own set of convictions. He said:

"An educational institution has many purposes. Certainly one of the purposes is to prepare individuals to the point that they will possess not only superior qualities of analysis to go to the heart of complex problems...but also have the courage and the ability to state their convictions clearly, concisely and openly."

And, President Miller said, the result of that study and thought needs to be action.

"The spiritual strength of America demands personal development and involvement in matters not only economic, but also spiritual, social and moral."

- Those spiritual, social and moral matters are what Dr. King's speech was all about on that snowy winter evening 50 years ago. He spoke to us of the interrelated structure of reality, legislating morality and behavior, spirituality and social justice, and moving from the realm of ideas to the arena of intentional social action.

- I could not be more proud of the decisions and rationale laid out by Dr. Miller. He allowed our students to see two starkly different visions for America laid out in way that was undoubtedly unforgettable. Our campus community was able to take the measure of those two visions. Ross Barnett's vision of a nation devoted to segregation, hatred and intolerance was given its day and found wanting. Dr. King's vision of nonviolence, love and social justice prevailed. The notion that our individual ability to succeed in the world is dependent on every human being having the freedom to excel resonated with those who heard it.

- Dr. King's impact on our campus was profound. His death just over four years later was the reason behind the creation of our Martin Luther King Jr. Program that for years has been bringing underserved young people from Southwest Michigan to our campus.

- To help us explore the spiritual, social and moral issues outlined by Dr. King, we have with us today one of our alumni, who clearly took with him from WMU both the technical skills and the spiritual, social and moral considerations that make for a thoughtful and productive citizen and professional. We are honored to have him here as our guide for this afternoon's reflections.

- Ed Gordon is a native Detroiter and is a 1982 WMU alumnus who earned a degree in communication and political science. The Emmy-award-winning

broadcaster and reporter began his rapid rise through the ranks of the broadcast industry at a PBS affiliate in Detroit shortly after earning his WMU degree.

- Over the past two decades, Ed Gordon has become known as master of the "big interview," conducting probing discussions with the nation and world's most recognizable newsmakers--from Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama to Oprah Winfrey and Trent Lott. He has covered the big issues of the day, from the 9/11 attacks to the 2012 presidential election.
- Ed Gordon has played major newscast roles with BET, NBC, CBS and PBS. His presence has been a staple of such programs as "60 Minutes II," "The Today Show" and "Dateline," and he has been the host of "News and Notes with Ed Gordon," "Our World" and "Weekly with Ed Gordon."
- Today, he is host of "Conversations with Ed Gordon," a nationally syndicated quarterly 1-hour program featuring in-depth, one-on-one interviews with headline making celebrities and newsmakers. He is also the host of the nationally syndicated radio program "WEEKEND WITH ED GORDON." In addition, he is an alumnus of the annual list of People Magazine's "50 Most Beautiful People."

Ladies and gentlemen, it is my pleasure to welcome a great Bronco home to WMU. He's here today to share his is own views and to moderate the lively panel discussion that will follow his address. Please join me in welcoming back to Western Michigan University Ed Gordon.