



We Shall Overcome

As we closed the event honoring the 35th Anniversary of Dr. King's I Have a Dream speech, I leaned over to tell U.S. Congressman John Lewis, "We're going to sing *We Shall Overcome*." He stood straight up and crossed his arms in front of him declaring, "This is how Martin taught us to sing it." It was such an honor to stand alongside of this legend, singing the civil rights anthem and feeling his power flowing through from his hand to mine. His speech at the event still resonates: "Don't give up. Don't become bitter. Don't get lost in a sea of despair. Keep the faith. Keep your eyes on the prize. Hold onto your dreams. Walk with the wind. Let the spirit of history be your guide."

The next day the photo on the front page of *The Boston Globe* showed him holding my hand - with just the sleeve edge of my blue jacket peeking out. On his left was President Clinton. For the previous months the Stone Soup Leadership Institute's team had carefully planned the event to be held at Union Chapel, the historic Black church in Oak Bluffs on the island of Martha's Vineyard. The event was originally designed as a healing opportunity for the island community, after a tragic black murder in this town. It was the launch of my book, *Stone Soup for the World: Life-Changing Stories of Everyday Heroes*. Over time, the event had gained a life of its own - with people sharing their own stories about how Dr. King had vacationed on the Vineyard. As it turned out, he had actually written this famous speech while visiting there in the summer of 1963.

Just a few days before the event we learned that President Clinton had accepted our invitation to attend our event. As a result, we were asked to disinvite 100 of our guests to accommodate the 100 reporters and TV cameras. Originally our event organizers and speakers had included the Black director of the Chamber of Commerce, and the Black principal of the high school. With the addition of the President, the Congressman and Charles Ogletree, it was decided that I would be the only one with them on the tiny stage, and to speak along with our prestigious guests. I was very nervous!

As I prepared my remarks, I reflected on how my life's journey led to this auspicious moment. "Why was I in Roxbury at age 13, teaching Black youth to read?" I asked my mother - and was stunned by her response. "Well, your father marched with Dr. King." This was the first time I'd ever heard this story. In my speech that day I shared this profound revelation, and encouraged people to share their stories with their children. As I honored the Vineyard's legacy with the NAACP and the Institute's invited guests featured in my book: Trude Lash, Eleanor Roosevelt's dear friend and secretariat to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights to the founders of both City Year and the Calvert Trust's anti-apartheid movement, I invited them to share these stories with young people and challenge them to stand on the shoulders of these giants and have the courage to fight for a better world.

After the event, I searched my family's history to better understand how they influenced my own personal passion and commitment. In March 1965, Dr. King had invited leaders from all religions to join him for the Civil Rights

March from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. Each one that responded to Dr. King's Call to Action, brought back his vision for equality to their communities. From Detroit's Father Cunningham, who went on to found Focus Hope, to Chicago's Rev. Frank Carr, who built INROADS, Inc. I featured their stories in my book. My father responded to Dr. King's call as the lay leader of our Catholic church, under the progressive leadership of Pope John XXIII. When he returned home from that March, he was a changed man. In fact, he informed my mother that he wanted to move our growing family from the affluent North Shore to Boston's inner city to be with his new Black friends, as Dr. King called it, the Beloved Community.

Instead, on the weekends, our family would travel from Boston's North Shore to visit his new friends in the inner city neighborhoods of Dorchester and Roxbury. Rev. John Bullard and his wife Millie welcomed our large clan and treated us to barbecues in their backyard. My father bought a guitar and taught us to sing "We Shall Overcome." He would sing it around the campfire with his buddies and their children on our camping trips. That summer while camping on the Kancamagus Highway in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, we met Father Finley, St. Anne's Episcopal, in Dorchester. He invited us to help his church. That fall, at age 13, my mother and I traveled into the inner city every week to teach teens, kids older than me, how to read. It was there that I first witnessed the staggering inequities facing the Black community. (In 2017 *The Boston Globe* reported that the median net worth of Black families was only \$8,000.) Looking for creative ways to teach these youth, I discovered that comic books were the best way to keep their attention. This life-changing experience inspired me to become a teacher: the seed first planted with JFK's call for teachers. With my early tutoring imbedded in my being, I was committed that all children have the opportunity to learn.

My father had lived with poverty and seen injustice, growing up in the backwoods of Vermont. After serving in the U.S. Navy during World War II, he went to Norwich University, and then to Wentworth Institute in Boston to become an engineer. After marrying my mother, they bought a home on Boston's affluent North Shore, to ensure that their children would have a good education. While our very large middle class family was surrounded by privilege, we struggled to make ends meet. However, there was always room for one more. In 1966, my parents supported Civil Rights leader Mae Allen Gadpaille and her METCO's Bus Program to desegregate Boston's schools. We welcomed Black students to our home so they could attend good schools. Then when my father's college roommate asked him to host foreign exchange students attending Brandeis University, we welcomed Sylvester Aywe from Ghana. His cultural uniqueness, especially his tribal markings as the son of a chief, fascinated me. Later he became his country's representative to the United Nations.

Then when Dr. King was assassinated, we joined with our Beloved Community in Dorchester to honor his memory. Through our tears we sang "We Shall Overcome." It was a painful awakening for me to the reality of the racism running deep in our country. And then when watching the Red Sox win the AFC Championship at Fenway Park, I was horrified to see fans throw things at the only Black player, center-fielder Reggie Smith, who wore a helmet to protect himself. Then when I received my high school's Community Service Award, it never occurred to me that there would be an award for just doing the right thing.

My father worked too hard and died too young, at 46 years old, leaving me, as the eldest, to support my mother, and to carry on his legacy. My father was a very complicated man: he was admired by many for his leadership, but he was also scarred by war, and upset by injustices he'd seen and experienced.

I started college early, as a "swing shift freshman," and gravitated toward the upper class Black women in my dorm. It was eye-opening to listen to their tough journeys to become the first in their families to attend college. They welcomed me into their colorful world of soul music, and introduced me to their library of books. *Black Like Me*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* helped me make sense out of what I'd seen. As we traveled together to the March on Washington in 1970, I felt a wonderful sense of community with these street-smart and wise young women.

After graduating from college, I attempted to bring what I had learned in my progressive education into the archaic public education system. Working with disadvantaged and special needs children in Florida and Massachusetts, I was shocked to discover how woefully inadequate the system was: and how unwilling the system was to adopt new ideas that could more effectively reach all children. An out-of-the-box thinker, I searched for strategic partners to

join with in this urgent challenge. Then equipped with my masters' degree in business, I made a case for companies to invest in the education of their future workforce. In the business world, I finally discovered a window of opportunity - enlightened self-interest, a win-win-win. Over time, with the support of internal change agents, we built bridges with schools, and developed programs that awakened companies to the power of investing in youth, especially children of color, to receive an equitable education, and be prepared for the world of work.

In 1997, the Stone Soup Leadership Institute was founded by multicultural people featured in my book who were deeply concerned about our collective future, especially the future for young people. For more than 20 years, the Institute's commitment has been to provide quality education for all - especially for young people of color. Through our educational tools, trainings, sustainability summits, and youth-community leadership initiatives, we strive to empower them to become leaders of a just, equitable, humanitarian society, and a sustainable world. It's been an honor to work alongside those who are on the front lines, those who are adversely affected by climate change, and by economic and social injustices. We put into practice the deeply held values of my youth. To close our events, we always sing "We Shall Overcome."

Over the years, the Institute has worked alongside others like Rose Styron, Chairperson of Amnesty International's 50th Anniversary event on Martha's Vineyard. There, our Black youth leaders from Jamaica met their hero, Harry Belafonte Jr., and produced a video of him and others, *Passing the Torch*. That summer, they received the Institute's Walter Cronkite Award, along with civil rights champion Charlayne Hunter-Gault. We've been invited to work in the inner cities of Baltimore, Boston, Oakland, and Cincinnati. Members of the Black community, strong Black women, have been my teachers, mentors, and allies. I've been inspired and guided by them, sometimes 'schooled' by them, and supported by them in a myriad of ways. I'm grateful to the Institute's past board president, Marsha Reeves Jews, and International Advisory Council members Hafsat Abiola, Felicia Davis, Gretchen Underwood, Doris Clark, Pamela Ray and Randi Vega. My deepest gratitude to them for their trust in and support for me.

When I wrote my first book I collected multicultural stories of forty people around the world, including twelve from the Black community. For the last 18 years the Institute has used the book and curriculum to inspire young people to overcome obstacles and envision their dreams for their lives, their communities and the world. My new book *Stone Soup for a Sustainable World: Life-Changing Stories of Young Heroes* features 50 stories of multicultural young people from around the world, with 14 stories from the Black community. U.S. Congressman John Lewis gave me his blessing to feature his story of the founding of SNCC in this new book so we can inspire young people to carry on his great work, and to vote. This year, in honor the 47th anniversary of Dr. King's *I Have a Dream* speech, the Institute is launching the Dream Initiative in conjunction with a virtual Back-to-School Campaign. We invite strategic partners to join with us to bring these stories of 100 multicultural heroes - along with our educational videos, tools to inspire the next generation to stay true to their own dreams for their lives, their communities and the world. #BlackYouthRead. #BlackYouthVote.

***Oh deep in my heart.
I do believe that We Shall Overcome one day.***

**Marianne Larned
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**Stone Soup Leadership Institute
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