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L.A. audience recalls hearing, following King

'Whenever he spoke, you listened,' one says

By Alex Dobuzinskis

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Sunday, January 16, 2005 - Many people look at Martin Luther King Jr. as someone in a history book: a civil rights pioneer who had a dream of creating racial equality through peaceful means.

But for Evelyn Eccles, King isn't just a page in a book. She fought for his dream in the 1960s and marched alongside him many times in Birmingham, Ala.

The opposition was seldom peaceful toward the marchers.

"At that time, people didn't have a lot of weapons like guns and all, but they'd throw stones. They'd spit on people," said Eccles, a retired school psychologist from Inglewood. "If they were throwing things, we would sort of huddle together, roll up in a ball or something. It was really like fighting a war."

Eccles was one of more than 700 people who honored King on Sunday during ceremonies at Forest Lawn Memorial-Park, Hollywood Hills. Many in the audience had either heard King speak or had been involved in his marches or campaigns.

Franklin Henderson, 75, of Ladera Heights saw King speak in the mid-1960s when the civil rights leader came to Los Angeles. He remembers that King had the audience transfixed.

"Whenever he spoke, you listened," Henderson said.

Civil rights attorney Connie Rice gave the keynote address Sunday, and clergy from the Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish and Muslim faiths also spoke. Rep. Brad Sherman, D-Sherman Oaks, Burbank Mayor Marsha Ramos, Los Angeles City Councilman Dennis Zine and state Sen. Richard Alarcon, D-Van Nuys, were among public officials who attended.

"Diversity was not his goal," Rice said about King. "The goal was integration. And by integration, ... he meant the complete sharing of political and economic power."

King's vision was to harness the powers of business, government and the military to improve conditions for the less fortunate, Rice said. And he thought about poverty from a global perspective, showing concern for poor children in places such as Bangladesh and Rwanda as well as in the United States.

But King, who was killed in 1968 in Memphis at the age of 39, did not have enough time to complete his goals, Rice said.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we can pick his baton back up ... and we can honor his legacy by realizing equality," Rice told the crowd.

Eccles, the retired school psychologist, said that although she was not injured in marches in Birmingham, others were not so lucky.

"I had some neighbors who were bitten by the dogs in Birmingham, and I knew a lady who was eight months pregnant with twins who was knocked down by the fire hose water," Eccles said.

Eccles remembers seeing King at restaurants and other spots in her neighborhood when she moved to Atlanta, and she

remembers a King different from the orator preserved on film.

"He was very down-to-earth. In person, he didn't seem like he does on TV," she said. "He could talk to anybody."

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