

Guardian of The Dream

By Kimati A. Ramsey



Commonly referred to as the March on Washington, the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom brought over 200,000 people to the nation's capitol to protest racial discrimination and show support for civil rights legislation that was pending in Congress. The March on Washington took place on August 28, 1963. (Courtesy of History.com)

On the heels of the 53rd anniversary of the March on Washington for Freedom and Jobs later this week, I was privileged to have a profound conversation with recent Basketball Hall of Fame inductee, dear friend, mentor and guardian of Dr. King's historic "I Have a Dream" speech, "Coach" George H. Raveling.

We all experience events in our lifetime that are so transformative in nature, that the occurrence and most minute detail can remain forever engrained in our hearts, minds and souls.

One of those memorable moments came for recent Basketball Hall of Fame inductee "[Coach](#)" [George H. Raveling](#) at the age of twenty-six as he stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. on August 28, 1963, looking out on a sea of humanity.



August 28, 1963—George H. Raveling (lower right, foreground) just after Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. (middle right) delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech during the March on Washington. (Johnson Publishing Company, LLC)

Before Raveling set out on a prolific career, garnering countless of accolades, becoming a trailblazing basketball coach, Nike’s Director of International Basketball, an authentic leader, servant humanitarian and gracious mentor to many; he was just beginning his journey in navigating the “real world,” after graduating three years prior from Villanova University with an Economics Bachelor of Science degree in hand and a fruitful collegiate basketball playing career in the record books.



George H. Raveling with Coach Al Severance. Raveling received a scholarship in 1957 from Villanova University. During his four years, he had a stellar collegiate record setting basketball career and graduated in 1960 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Economics. (Courtesy of Villanova University Athletics)

Standing on the grounds of the Washington Monument at 6 feet 4 inches tall Raveling and his best friend Warren Wilson were approached by a March on Washington demonstration organizer on the evening of August 27th. The march became one of the largest political civil rights rallies in American history, creating a movement and using the nation's capital as a platform to protest against racial discrimination while also showing support for civil rights legislation that was pending in Congress.

That August 27th evening, the organizer asked Raveling and Wilson if they were planning on attending the demonstration proceedings the next day as they were in need of extra volunteers due to more gathers being in attendance than initially planned. The march ended up bringing over 200,000 people to the nation's capitol the next day.



People of all ages and backgrounds participated in the March on Washington, a large scale protest which drew over 200,000 people to Washington D.C. on August 28, 1963. (Courtesy of History.com)

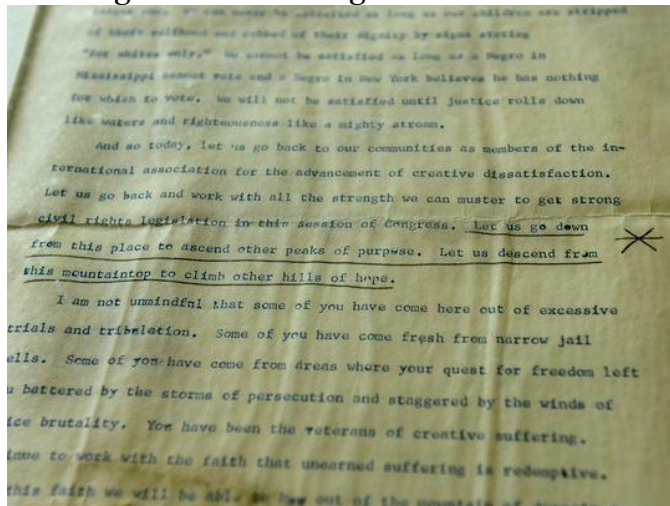
Raveling and Wilson's openness and simple response of yes to the opportunity to volunteer as well as arriving earlier than needed the next morning created the fateful scene for a memorable and historic split exchange on the Lincoln Memorial steps between an iconic global leader and activist by the name of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and a gentle giant leader in the making named George H. Raveling.

However, to understand the magnitude and interweaving fate of this moment on August 28, 1963, and how life truly works in miraculous ways, we must take a deeper look into the life of Dr. King and George Raveling 48 hours prior to a day that went down as one of the greatest demonstrations for human rights in United States history.

Two days before the demonstration, Dr. King was prepping with his aides and striving to finalize the direction of the speech which he was scheduled to orate. His council did not think he should use the lines "I have a dream" in his speech as they thought it was *trite* and *cliche* and had been used too many times prior. Dr. King's use of "I have a dream" was a theme that was featured in an address at a fundraiser a week earlier in Chicago and months prior at rallies in Detroit and Selma. Dr. King wholeheartedly taking the feedback from his council led him to omit any reference to "I have a dream" in the entire document of the speech.

While Dr. King was preparing for the demonstration and the finalized strategy of the speech with his council team, Raveling was in Claymont, Delaware at Warren Wilson's

family home. Dr. Woodrow Wilson, Warren's father, a prominent dentist in Wilmington, advocated during dinner with his wife Lucile, that George and Warren go to Washington, D.C. to soak in the sights and sounds of this monumental time in history. Still young and naive, the two young men had not lived enough to fully grasp why Dr. Wilson was so adamant that they be present at the March on Washington demonstrations two days later on August 28th. With Dr. Wilson's gracious lending of the car and cash, George and Warren departed, making the two hour drive from Delaware to Washington, D.C. Upon arrival they checked into a motel on New York Avenue and made their way to the Washington Monument grounds.



After Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech on August 28, 1963, a twenty-six year old Raveling approached Dr. King, asking if he could have his copy of the speech. For 53 years, George H. Raveling has been the guardian of one of the most precious documents in American history.

For Raveling to become the guardian of Dr. King's speech we are presented with so many what ifs and the beauty of fate...

What if the Wilson family did not urge son Warren and George to take in the demonstration?

What if Dr. King did not deviate from the planned written speech and does not ad-lib the "I Have a Dream" section?

What if gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, a close confidant to Dr. King, who stood behind him at the podium as he spoke that day did not encourage him to tell the people about the dream? Would the speech still have the impact as one of the greatest orator compositions in history that changed America's consciousness?

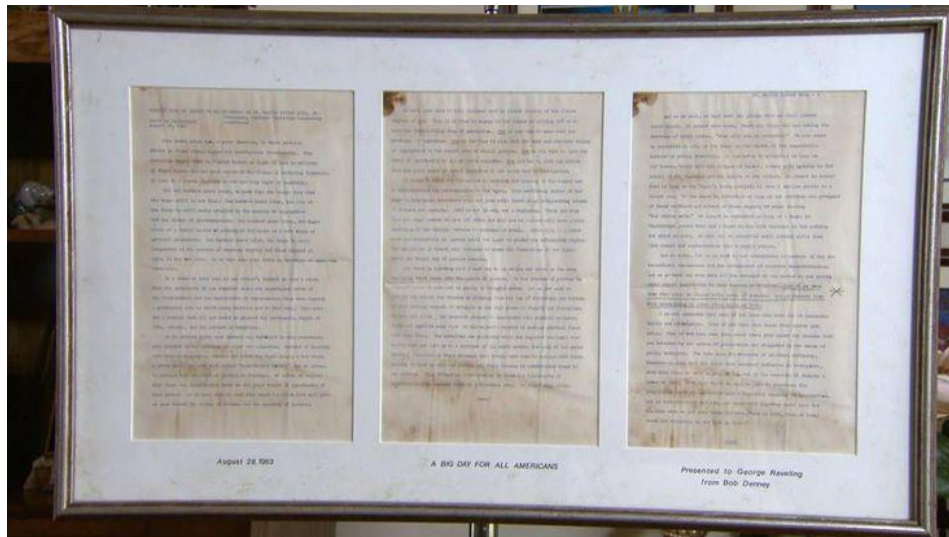
What if the organizers did not allow Dr. King to go over the assigned five minute designated speech limit that other presenters had to abide by?

What if Raveling and Wilson did not show up the evening before at the Washington Monument grounds or earlier than needed on the morning of the demonstration, would they have still been assigned to handle podium security volunteer duties on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial?

And what if after Dr. King ends with his grand crescendo lines “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty we are free at last!” Raveling does not approach Dr. King asking for his copy of the speech?

While there are so many what ifs, the reality becomes clear that all these instances were destined to happen. That George H. Raveling was in the right place at the right time and seized the opportunity. The speech exchange between two extraordinary souls becomes an unconscious passing of the civic duty torch.

For twenty years Raveling housed the speech as we know today as “I Have a Dream,” in an autographed copy of President Harry S. Truman’s autobiography. It was not until Raveling took the coaching job with the Iowa Hawkeyes in 1983 and was interviewed by a reporter from the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* named Bob Denney who was doing a piece on Raveling being the first African American head basketball coach in Iowa history that it became public knowledge that he was the guardian and keeper of this precious and historic document.



The famous theme of “I Have a Dream” in Dr. King’s August 1963 monumental speech at the March on Washington demonstration was never referenced in the original manuscript that Dr. King read from.

When questioned, what made you ask Dr. King for the speech, Raveling smiles and asserts, “I have no idea why I even asked him for the speech. But I’m sure glad that I did.”



For 53 years, “Coach” George H. Raveling has been the safe keeper of the speech our society has come to know as “I Have a Dream.”

After living through history, traveling the globe, accumulating countless of honors and being a positive difference maker in the lives of thousands, how does “Coach” George H. Raveling now at seventy-nine years old view the 1963 movement, Dr. King’s legacy and the state of humanity. The following conversation was conducted with Mr. Raveling in Los Angeles, California.

Q. What leadership qualities have you learned from Dr. King and incorporated into your living?

A. In my opinion the best form of leadership is servant leadership. At the end of the day your fundamental responsibility is to serve those who you lead. With that as the foundation, you figure out the needs of the group as a whole as well as the needs of the group from an individual standpoint. So the needs in Selma, Alabama might be different than the needs in Jackson, Mississippi, or for the people in Detroit and D.C. But as you go along, the one thing that becomes crystal clear for a servant leader is that it is never about ME and always about WE. I think it becomes incumbent upon you as a leader to ask yourself and figure out how can I best serve the needs of those individuals who are followers. The minute you embrace servant leadership, it defines your leadership style.

Q. With our society still dealing with many of the same issues Dr. King passionately spoke about 53 years ago, has his vision and humanity’s call to action become stagnated?

A. I do not think so. What it says to me is how complex the dream is. Particularly when you step out of the dream and start to pursue the dream, that is when you begin to face

life realities. We find out that a lot of dreams are more complex than we realize, when we first conceive the idea. I can understand why people would feel frustrated that we are still grappling with the same issues and that the dream has not come to its conclusion. But not all dreams are ultimately fulfilled. There are no finish lines in some dreams. To me, what we have learned is this is going to be an ongoing struggle to make the dream a reality. And I think we have realized that dreams come with a lot of complexities. But just the fact that Dr. King said he had a dream and people bought into the dream, they also learned a valuable lesson is when you buy into a dream—you buy into it wholeheartedly. And there is a price that you pay for buy in. I am not too sure when it is all said and done that we are not better off in that we have not fully achieved the dream. I think what it does as the dream moves from generation, to generation, it continues to keep people focused and committed on the vision. Also the speech itself is an enduring mechanism for us because every bit is applicable today as it was 53 years ago. And maybe that is the way it should be where we hear this voice from the distance crying I Have a Dream and it keeps the dream central in our minds. So maybe the fact we have not fully achieved the dream is more of an advantage than a disadvantage.

Q. What are your feelings on today's athletes using their platforms to speak out against injustices and bringing awareness to social and political issues?

A. We have to be careful when we signal just athletes. I think athletes are just part of our overall social structure. Why are athletes anymore incumbent to speak out than ministers, teachers, judges, the everyday civilian? [What I think athletes do is remind us that we all have a civic responsibility to speak out against injustice and inequality.](#) Some people have a better platform than others to get their message heard. But at the same time, human beings are probably in the best position they have ever been in during the history of world. Due to technology, a sixteen year old kid in Bombay, India can have his voice heard instantly all over the world, if he has a powerful enough message. [A good example, the last couple days, the news has constantly showed the child from Syria sitting with blood all over him. The child did not have to say anything, but the picture told a powerful story.](#) So today, I think what we have to come to grips with is that we all have a responsibility to be part of the solution. And how we manifest that should be left up to each individual. I think we get ourselves in trouble when we begin to think that one size fits all. There are a variety of ways a person can contribute, but contribute they must.

Q. What does the speech and Dr. King's legacy mean to you?

A. I think that when I look back on it now, it really has been a constant reminder to me of the true value a dream has and the responsibilities that come with having a dream. The relevance that a dream can play in a person's life. I have learned to help be a Dream Maker. To assist people in turning their dreams into realities. It is no question that it has caused me to reevaluate how I live my life and what I believe my contributions to society should be.

Studying Dr. King's legacy and and sharing with a living legend in Mr. Raveling captures the essence that each day we are presented the most beautiful gift called life and valuable asset of time to be of service to another individual and community. We all have the ability to be a positive difference and dream maker.

While Mr. Raveling has been the guardian of the *I Have a Dream* speech for the last 53 years, he understands that the speech does not just belong to him, but to humanity. While the speech will one day be housed outside of a Los Angeles bank vault under the condition to never be sold, and placed where people can share and connect with this piece of the puzzle in Dr. King's legacy. In the interim though, the speech could not be in better hands than Mr. Raveling's as his genuine heart, epic wisdom, amazing grace and unconditional love is synonymous to Dr. King's civic contributions and life. The manner in which Mr. Raveling meticulously and consciously approaches his life and nurtures his relationships while being a change agent to countless of individuals as well as local and global communities, pays homage to Dr. King in the process—keeping his legacy and dream alive and thriving forward.



Inductee “Coach” George H. Raveling speaks during the 2015 Basketball Hall of Fame Enshrinement Ceremony on September 11, 2015 at the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Massachusetts.