

Few students join in rally for civil rights

Where are the activists?

Veterans of the movement wonder who is to take up the mantle.

By David Pendered
dpendered@ajc.com

Civil rights veterans who encounter little interest among college students in joining the movement say there typically has been a shortage of activists, except in high-profile encounters.

The issue of who will shoulder the civil rights mantle arose twice last week when there was low attendance at significant commemorations.

Few attended the 40th anniversary of the start of the black student rights movement in Atlanta, or at the 32nd anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

Seasoned activists said they were not dismayed at the apparent lack of interest by young people. Throughout their lifetime, they said, participation on the day-to-day grind has been low.

"The movement did not have a massive number of participants," said state Rep. Tyrone Brooks (D-Atlanta). "The movement consisted of a hard-core group in a city or county willing to organize for social change.

"Occasionally we got huge numbers, with the march on Washington or the second march on Edmund Pettus Bridge," Brooks said. "We never were able to transform the movement into the everyday life of working people. It's sad, but it's true."

At the commemoration of his father's death, Martin Luther King III reminded listeners of the impact just a few activists can create.

"It's not always large numbers; it's just a few good men and women," King said.

Several students who attended a commemoration at Atlanta University Center for the Atlanta Student Movement asked their elders how they can become active on social issues, especially when few of their peers are interested.

"What can I do to further get involved with [New York Mayor Rudolph] Giuliani, when there are innocent black people dying

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ERICK JOHNSON

AUC student

up there?" asked Marcia Price, a sophomore at Spelman College. Giuliani has been accused of inaction after a series of highly publicized shootings of civilians by New York police.

Fulton County District Attorney Paul Howard offered a short but meaningful response.

"Get involved in politics," Howard said.

Howard said he decided to become a prosecutor when he was a teenager in Burke County. He attended the trial of a black man who was identified with a racial slur by the victim, prosecutor and his own defense lawyer. Howard said he wanted to help change the system.

Howard, who is black, said he finds himself in a "different spot" on the civil rights movement because 90 percent of Fulton County defendants are black. He said most of them use drugs.

"Eighty-six percent of the arrests have drugs in their blood," Howard said. "Of them, 62 percent use crack [cocaine]."

Erick Johnson, a student at AUC, said many students are focused on earning good salaries because many social barriers have already been removed.

"The reality is there aren't a lot of things that make us angry," Johnson said. "We are focused on material possessions and a way to get them."

Howard said relatively few students were active on social issues when he attended Morehouse College, from 1968 to 1972. Still, he said, they made a difference.

"The Atlanta University Center was closed during 1969 because of a student boycott over the lack of a black history curriculum," Howard said. "What people did in the past is try to make it so students of the following generations don't have to go through the same thing."