BenU alumnus offers rare look at King in photo art display

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As a young priest who marched alongside the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Bernard Kleina witnessed several seminal moments in history – moments in which he was fortunate to document with the camera by his side.

Today, Kleina's pictures of King are among the rarest and most visually striking ever taken. They are important because they are some of the only known color photos of King in Chicago, marking the time when the civil rights movement shifted from the South to northern cities where racism and segregation were more subdued and equally as difficult to fight.

"When you see photos of King on his birthday, you are going to see him in his 'I have a Dream' speech or in Selma and Montgomery, Alabama," Kleina

said. "You are never going to see him in Chicago. I was trying to change that to help people understand that what Dr. King faced in the South, he also faced up here in the North. There was so much criticism of Dr. King in the South and in Chicago that he was the one who was starting the violence and I wanted to show that was not correct."

The photos have since been displayed at civil rights museums and galleries across the country. This past August, some of Kleina's photographs became part of the Smithsonian's national collection and will appear in the upcoming photo book, "Through the African American Lens: Double Exposure," from the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Kleina, who graduated from Benedictine University (then St. Procopius College) in 1957 and became an ordained Catholic Priest in 1961, was compelled to join the movement after learning about the beatings of protesters near Selma as they attempted to make their way to Montgomery to call for an end to discriminatory voting practices. Their efforts were stalled after they were attacked with billy clubs and tear gassed by Alabama State Troopers. One week prior, a white Unitarian minister who had traveled from Boston to lend his support was beaten to death by a group of white supremacists.

"It was a very difficult time," Kleina recalled. "I don't think even I realized the danger that I was in — maybe I didn't want to. You don't want to let that deter you from what you believe ought to be done."

Two days before the marches resumed on March 21, 1965, Kleina was arrested after walking with four other individuals — three of whom were black — in a public street, purportedly for parading without a permit. The incident made the front page of the Selma Times-Journal, and was described by Selma's public safety director at the time as "an activity which was calculated to get someone injured or killed."

"It was somewhat intimidating, although I think because I was young and had played football at St. Procopius I thought I was invincible," Kleina said. "I was fairly naive. I thought the discrimination I saw was pretty limited to the South, but after I went down to Selma I found that wasn't the case. It opened my eyes to the extent of discrimination not only in the South, but in the North as well. Frankly, going down to Selma changed my whole life."

Kleina said his decision to join King in Alabama was reinforced by many priests and teachers he came in contact with at Benedictine, such as Fr. Adolph E. Hrdlicka, O.S.B., who was the school's groundskeeper and librarian before becoming president of the college in 1956,and Fr. Clement

Sobr, O.S.B., who was vice rector at St. Procopius Seminary."The priests had a great value system and I tried to emulate the people I admired in many ways," Kleina said. "Going to St. Procopius at that time was really the perfect choice for me."

Five months after the Selma-to- Montgomery march, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act, which prohibited racial discrimination in voting and outlawed literacy tests and other devices that were used historically to deprive minorities of the right to vote.

The next year, King set his sights on Chicago, where housing discrimination and a lack of services were contributing to urban decay in the city's black neighborhoods. After several marches and little-to-no progress, King decided to take the marches out of the black community and into largely white neighborhoods.

"Some of those marches were pretty rough," Kleina said. "Sometimes, the people outside the protests would throw rocks, bottles and cherry bombs at us over the heads of police, and the police did nothing so long as you did not hit them."

Both Kleina and King were hit by flying objects in a particularly combative march in Marquette Park. Tires were slashed and cars were overturned. Some cars even caught on fire, while others ended up in a nearby lagoon.

"I think the people from Mississippi ought to come to Chicago to learn how to hate," King would later say of the experience.

While the city agreed to make some concessions, for the most part they turned out to be empty promises. After Chicago, King went on to give speeches expressing his opposition to the Vietnam War and the need to concentrate on more domestic issues, like the needs of the poor. He was preparing to organize another massive march on Washington, D.C. to advocate for the creation of a poor people's bill of rights when he was assassinated on April 4, 1968, in Memphis, Tenn.

Although he managed to get close to King in a way no one without credentials could today, Kleina never spoke directly with the civil rights leader.

"I always thought, 'OK, well I can't do it at this demonstration, I will do it tomorrow or the next day,' but the next day never came," Kleina said. "When I get over that I think, I am doing what he would really like me to do, but it still is really one of my biggest regrets."

Kleina left the priesthood in 1968, dedicating the rest of his life to advocating for the fair housing rights of individuals in DuPage County as the executive director of the HOPE Fair Housing Center from 1970-2011. He is also a founding member of the National Housing Alliance, on whose board he still serves to this day.

He has received numerous awards for his work including "Humanitarian of the Year" from the West Suburban Philanthropic Network, the "Lifetime Achievement Award" from the DuPage County branch of the NAACP, and the Freedom Flame Award from the National Voting Rights Museum and Institute.

Through the HOPE Fair Housing Center, Kleina and others have helped more than 25,000 renters, potential renters and homeowners better understand their rights. The organization has also investigated more than 12,500 complaints of housing discrimination and filed more than 290 fair housing complaints.

One case Kleina is particularly proud of forced a racetrack to upgrade and expand its on-site housing to include running water, showers and bathrooms for Hispanic workers and their families.

"I felt good we could intervene and do something about that, and that we've been able to accomplish things locally and nationally as well," Kleina said. "I feel my photography has been a big help in getting people to understand these problems and to figure out how to solve them."

Enacting change, of course, did not come easy. Just like King, HOPE had to overcome a lot of resistance in its early days.

"We had our windows shot out, we got threatening letters and phone calls," Kleina said. "The county was difficult to deal with at the time and would try to undercut us in many ways. There was a great deal of opposition to what we were doing, and all we were doing was representing people who were denied housing because of their race or national origin, or because children in the family were on disability."

In addition to his photography, Kleina has produced several award winning videos, education materials and presentations on fair housing and lending discrimination for numerous government agencies, municipalities, banks, realtors and apartment associations.

He is currently working on a video about home foreclosures and the preference for banks to maintain foreclosed homes in majority white neighborhoods, while leaving homes in black neighborhoods to fester.

"(When people look back at the civil rights era) I don't want them to look back and think 'Oh, that was then and everything is OK now,'" Kleina said. "So I always try and include contemporary visuals in my work so people understand Dr. King's work is not finished."

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Talk and Exhibit February 1, 2015
Art Gallery from January 15 – February 28, 2015
Fr. Michael E. Komechak O.S.B.