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## Friend of MLK says ... Much accomplished, much to be done



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**H**istory came alive Monday for eight Southland honor students who marked the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday by first paying tribute to the past and then ushering in the future.

During a celebratory breakfast at the Union League Club of Chicago, the students, all juniors at Southland College Prep Charter High School in Richton Park, had the honor of welcoming civil rights activist Juanita Jones Abernathy, who spoke about the long, difficult and often bloody road that eventually brought Barack Obama to the White House.

Afterward, they listened as the nation's 44th president outlined the work that still needs to be done.

"It was as if President Obama knew exactly what Ms. Abernathy was going to say," said Asia Jenkins, 16, of Olympia Fields. "The two speeches flowed together nicely."

Abernathy, widow of Ralph Abernathy, grew up in the same county as King's wife, Coretta Scott King. The two couples were close friends as well as compatriots at the forefront of America's civil rights movement. Today, only Abernathy survives. No small feat, either, considering her house was bombed while she and then-infant daughter Gwendolyn slept.

"One of the greatest accomplishments for me is to be a black woman who helped to make it possible for Barack Hussein Obama to be president," Abernathy said. "He's standing on my shoulders."

In addition to describing King as "a wonderful man with a great sense of humor who could tease you to death," Abernathy recounted the details of the 1955 Mont-



**Juanita Jones Abernathy, widow of civil rights leader Ralph Abernathy, prepares to speak Monday at the Union League Club of Chicago.** | PHOTOS BY JOHN H. WHITE-SUN-TIMES

gomery Bus Boycott, when blacks in Alabama joined forces to end the humiliating system that relegated them to the backs of buses. She said Montgomery blazed a trail to Birmingham, which led to Selma, which led to Albany, which gave way to Chicago.

"Chicago was a mess back then," she said, calling the Windy City "Up South," a term blacks gave to northern cities that were just as segregated and racist as those in the South.

On her first shopping trip to a Marshall Field's department store, Abernathy was told there were no hats in her size. When she protested that no one had asked her hat size, she was told again that there were no selections that would fit her.

She recalled the fight to get blacks to register to vote, then the subsequent fight to end the special poll tax that was applied to those who tried to exercise that right. She talked about the struggle to desegregate schools, which led to

the struggle to desegregate neighborhoods.

Then she surprised the audience by saying much of the work done to advance civil rights was done by women.

"Women were the backbone of the movement," she said.

She added that the great amount of work that remains to be done will likely fall on the backs of women.

"As women, we hit that glass ceiling a lot faster. We live in a very chauvinistic society," she said. "But we can't give up, we have to keep moving forward."

She encouraged the young people in the audience, many of whom are members of the Union League Boys and Girls clubs, to "take advantage of every opportunity that comes your way. Remember you have the ability, you are as good as anybody and whatever field you pursue, go to the top."

Aronna Wynne said Abernathy's speech was "wonderfully inspiring."



**Southland College Prep Charter High School student Morgan Brown (left) and Aronna Wynne applaud during Monday's celebratory breakfast at the Union League Club.**

The 16-year-old from Olympia Fields said it affected her so much, "I am now redirecting my future." Instead of becoming a lawyer, she wants to be an advocate for women.

Imani Thornton, 17, of Matteson, said, "She exposed things that you don't hear talked about a lot in American politics: women's rights."

Ashley Jackson said, "This was my first time hearing someone from the civil rights movement speak in person. To know that she was there when major events occurred. It's just crazy. The history books can't tell it like this."

The 17-year-old Matteson resident was equally moved by Obama's speech.

"His was more than a speech. It was emotional for me," she said. "I love what was behind it."

Ashley, who has been following Obama's work since she was in middle school, said the president will have his hands full this next term dealing with a divided Congress. Getting people to work together for the greater good is more difficult for Obama, she said, "because he is a man of color."

"Just look at the fiscal cliff. It's baffling how something so necessary couldn't get done," she said.

Though he was the lone male in the Southland Prep group, Ian Katiku, 16, said it was interesting to learn about the women behind the civil rights movement.

"I never knew how much they did," he said.

The Park Forest resident, who plans to pursue international business one day, also said he appreciated it when Obama reiterated Abernathy's call for equal rights for women.

"I think the biggest problem in this country right now is the growing disparity in wealth," he said. "It will be interesting to see how he will resolve this."