

# A Keeper of Martin Luther King's Legacy

By [DeNeen L. Brown](#) January 17, 2016



John W. McCaskill works as a National Park Service guide at the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Washington.

At his monument on the Mall, keepers of Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy work hard to keep his story alive, imparting lessons to crowds, recalling his speeches, and acknowledging civil rights foot soldiers who arrive here, literally walking through the statue's split in the "Mountain of Despair." Here, National Park Service guide John W. McCaskill often greets civil rights icons visiting the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial. They are older now. Many in the crowds of tourists fail to recognize them or their sacrifices.

"I have seen so many people who were part of the struggle come through this 'Mountain of Despair,'" McCaskill says, pointing to the walkway carved in the sculpture, which is called the "Stone of Hope" and draws its name from a line in King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech: "With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope."

At the entrance to the memorial, two huge stones split apart, symbolizing the "Mountain of Despair." A slice of the sculpture is pushed out several feet from the split, and from this slice, King's image emerges.

"I've seen Dick Gregory, Dr. Dorothy Cotton, John Lewis, the Rev. Dr. C.T. Vivian," McCaskill said. "I go and honor them, and all of them at the end of the conversation, say, 'Thank you for being here.' And I say, 'Uh-uh. You thanking me? No. Because if it wasn't for you, I wouldn't even be here.'"

McCaskill, 52, a D.C. native who has been a park guide since 2011, stands in the shadow of the monument as people mingle around him. A historian, he loves this post. No question is too small or too big. With three master's degrees in history, he rattles off dates, quotes and context about King and civil rights leaders who worked in King's inner circle.

McCaskill remembers the summer of 2013, when he looked across the memorial grounds and saw civil rights legend Cordy Tindell "C.T." Vivian, who that year had been [awarded the Medal of Freedom](#) for his participation in Freedom Rides and sit-ins, which helped usher in integration in this country.

"I saw him out the corner of my eye and it registered. I'm like, 'Is that the Rev. C.T. Vivian?' You know C.T. Vivian was on the steps of the municipal building when they were trying to register to vote, down in Birmingham," McCaskill recalled.

"And Jim Clark," the sheriff and segregationist who led the "Bloody Sunday" violence against civil rights marchers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Alabama, "was standing there, saying, 'You can't register.'"

## Source #2

Vivian demanded an explanation. In an exchange that was widely televised, Clark punched Vivian so hard that he broke his hand. “Blood is coming out his nose and mouth,” McCaskill said, “and this is what Vivian says on camera: ‘We are willing to be beaten for democracy.’”

McCaskill tears up, standing in the shadow of King’s monument. Around him, tourists are snapping selfies. Parents are explaining to their children King’s contributions to social justice. A group of protesters wave flags and shout about injustices in Syria, from which thousands of refugees have fled. One woman carries a sign that reads “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

McCaskill says the memorial is a place where hundreds come to reflect on justice and efforts for peace. The memorial also is a place, McCaskill said, where people come to express gratitude to civil rights workers.

McCaskill continues his story about the day he saw Vivian, who worked on King’s executive staff. “I go over to him and I extend my hand, and before I get to him, I drop to one knee. I thanked him about 20 times. I said, ‘Sir, you were willing to lay your life down for a generation you haven’t even met.’ And he said, ‘Yeah, but I knew they were coming.’”

McCaskill stomps his feet with emotion. “So, yeah, it’s personal for me. I’m standing on his shoulders,” he said, “and others are standing on his shoulders and others who came before him.”

Whenever McCaskill has the opportunity, he retells that story. “It’s one thing to lay your life down for your family, but for those who haven’t been born yet? Where do you find a group of people like that?”

On Monday, as the country collectively celebrates King’s life more than 30 years after Congress voted in favor of making his birthday a national holiday, crowds swell at the memorial. Many began celebrating King’s birthday Friday, on the actual date of his birth.

CeLillianne Green, a poet, teacher and social justice activist who lives in Northeast Washington, visited the memorial Friday. She walked down the winding path and stopped where King’s image emerges from the giant stone.

“I prefer to come when it’s quiet and when you can actually feel the light from the words that are lit up,” said Green. “People are much more contemplative about why they are here. You can really connect with the spirit of Dr. King.”

In 2011, Green wrote a poem about King, which she titled “A Man’s Worth.”

*“There is no question about his value or his worth. There is no question about why this nation celebrates his birth. He came and he left this nation and this world profoundly changed. For his work, a national memorial bears his name. Stand and commit to doing the work that remains to be done; the work needed to heal this nation and its people one by one. . . . Stand and truly honor this honorable man. Then ask: Am I doing the very best I can to preserve his vision and fulfill his plan?”*

## Source #2

Sherron Goffigan, 36, arrived at the memorial with nine of his classmates from a military school in Petersburg, Va. “We just wanted to stand around the monument ,” Goffigan said, “and just reflect on his legacy and the things that he has done — not just for African Americans but for people in general.”

People sometimes use the King holiday as a day off work, Goffigan said. “I tear up when I think about his life. This was one of the greatest men who has lived on this planet. He gave his all for people, and somebody took his life away and cut him short.”

McCaskill, walks the path along the granite wall, which contains some of King’s most famous quotes. He stops at his favorite quote: “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of convenience and comfort, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy — Strength to Love, 1963.”

The quote still moves him. As he walks, McCaskill fields questions from visitors. He meets a woman whose mother brought her as a little girl to the 1963 March on Washington. The woman explains where she was when she heard King was assassinated in 1968. When people tell their stories, McCaskill is silent. “They were there,” he says. Their words have import.

McCaskill remembers the day in 2011 when the memorial was dedicated and a woman rushed up to him disturbed the carving did not show King’s full portrait. “She wanted to know why they had cut him off at the knees,” said McCaskill, who explained that image was meant to portray King as still emerging from the “Mountain of Despair,” symbolizing he wasn’t finished yet.

“It’s important to keep the legacy alive,” McCaskill said, “because a lot of people sacrificed their lives for equality. A lot of people have died and many of us are standing on their shoulders.”