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# Princella Howard Dixon and the March to Selma



Princella H Dixon with copy of Freedom's Children  
photo Robert Anthony Stalcup

In March of 2015, MAPW student Princella Howard Dixon shared with the nation the celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Selma-to-Montgomery March for Voting Rights. The Selma March is also the subject of the 2015 Academy Award-nominated film *Selma*. The film covers the fateful attempt of marchers to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge on "Bloody Sunday," March 7, 1965, and the aftermath of that event.

Princella, who at the time of the march was a freshman at an Iowa college, served as president for the youth division of the NAACP for the State of Iowa. She answered the call to the nation from Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) president, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and returned to Montgomery, Alabama, her native city and state.

With thousands, she marched from Selma to Montgomery on March 21 through 25, continuing to the Alabama State Capitol. With Alabama Governor George Wallace, reportedly, viewing the massive gathering from the capitol window, Princella stood in the crowd and listened to Dr. King give one of his most noted speeches, "How Long, Not Long." This was less than two years after King's historic "I Have a Dream" speech.

The previous summer, Princella had been appointed by Andrew Young as the youngest field state representative for SCLC, and with a self-selected staff of five young

people, had travelled to Pritchard, Alabama, a community near Mobile. There she led daily voter registration rallies. In 1972, less than a decade later, Algernon Johnson (AJ) Cooper was elected mayor of Pritchard. He became one of the first black mayors in the nation.

For Princella, who had been nurtured in a progressive family and community, the Selma March was a milestone for the work that she and her family had been doing throughout her life. She was born in Montgomery, Alabama, and grew up there. Though she was only a child when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., came to Montgomery as pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Princella had already been taught by her parents to take on an active role in the community.

It was important to them that whatever privilege they had be shared with others, that church be more than someplace one attended on Sunday, that love be extended to all, regardless of skin color, class status, or any other external characteristic. It was this sort of active progressivism that Dr. King drew upon and was influenced by when he and others formed the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) and took on the formidable task of facing down oppression in the 1955 Bus Boycott. The Montgomery Bus Boycott was the first major protest of what would become the Civil Rights Movement.

Princella's family was active in support of the MIA. Her father used the taxi service he owned to help shuttle African American men, women, and children to school and places of employment. This alternative transport by taxicab companies, in addition to the many church-sponsored station wagons, provided some relief to the people of the community and helped to sustain the one-year boycott of the Montgomery city buses.

At the first mass meeting of the boycott, Princella's mother helped to prepare the young people who sang in the chorus. Rosa Parks, Ralph Abernathy, and Martin Luther King, who came to national acclaim with the advent of the boycott, were not just people on the news. They were people with whom she and her family interacted. In cooperation with other members of the African American community and some especially brave white individuals, they worked together to break the cycle of discrimination that existed throughout the South and in much of the rest of the country.

Princella remembers well the feeling that hung in the air in those early days of the movement: “One thing we all knew: something had to give. It was like a keg full of dynamite. Even in the quietness, it was too quiet. The whole country was too quiet.” These words appear in Ellen Levine’s [Freedom’s Children](#), a book that celebrates the contributions of Princella and other young people to the student leadership of the Civil Rights Movement.

Princella was actively organizing students for voting and equal citizenship rights as she completed high school in the spring of 1964 at St. Jude High School in Montgomery. It was on St. Jude’s campus, one year later, as referenced in the film *Selma*, that the marchers settled and were entertained with a concert, entitled “Stars for Freedom.” Princella attended the concert, headlined by artists such as, Tony Bennett, Harry Belafonte, Peter, Paul, and Mary, Nina Simone, Sammy Davis, Jr., Joan Baez, Pete Seeger, and Leonard Bernstein.

During the summer following her high school graduation, Princella co-chaired the Montgomery Student Movement.

When the mayor of Montgomery closed city parks rather than abide by federal statutes requiring that they be integrated, Princella wrote a letter of protest, a letter that is archived in her family collection of Civil Rights documents. Princella also worked with the founders of *The Southern Courier*, a newspaper that covered the Civil Rights Movement and the region’s volatile racial transition from 1965 until 1968. Princella wrote the *Courier*’s account of Governor George Wallace’s visit to Governor Lester Maddox at the Georgia Governor’s Mansion. This article is archived as a part of a collection at Tulane University in New Orleans.

In his speech commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Selma March, President Obama stated that though we have yet to achieve the equitable society those marchers sought that day in Selma, “Our job is easier because somebody already got us through that first mile. Somebody already got us across that bridge.” For those of us in the English Department and the MAPW program, it is inspiring to know that one of our own braved the danger and walked the path before us.

On March 4, 2006, in Selma, Alabama, at the Commemorative Banquet of the Selma-to-Montgomery March, Princella Howard Dixon was presented with the Freedom Flame Award for her work to fulfill the American creed of freedom, justice, and equality.

“The boycott was a real movement. It was so powerful. In a year you can build great momentum. It brought together even people who were generally at odds with each other”

-From *Freedom’s Children*