

John Lewis and the Civil Rights Movement in Carroll County

Congressman John Lewis (D-GA), was, of course, a highly renowned leader in the civil rights movement in the US. We are very fortunate to have our own John Lewis as a leader in the civil rights movement in Carroll County. Born in 1935, John Howard Lewis, Jr., his parents and 9 siblings lived in a four-room house in Johnsville, in a close-knit neighborhood of Black families. At that time, everything was officially segregated in Carroll County— schools, restaurants, movie theaters, community centers, swimming pools, bars, and housing complexes. At night, John's parents lived in fear of a visit from the nearby Ku Klux Klan.

John attended elementary school in the two-room all-Black school in Johnsville. His textbooks were damaged discards from the public school - covered with scribbles, missing pages, and often containing out-of-date information.

As a young child, John worked hard on a neighboring farm and for a neighbor on construction projects.

John joined a local troop of the Boy Scouts of America when he was 11 years old. Shortly after joining, he was selected troop leader. In an interview with Pam Zappardino for the African American Trailblazers oral history series on the Community Media Center's website, John reflects, "For the first time in my life, I became a leader of a group of people. The Boy Scouts gave me the first opportunity I had to travel and meet other people at camping jamborees. In the woods, there was no discrimination. It was almost, to me, as if we were in a different world. They taught us that you were your brother's keeper." From that point on, John accepted leadership roles.

John went to Robert Moton, an all-Black high school in Westminster, before dropping out at age 16 to work full-time. (He later received his GED.) He got his certification as a Licensed Practical Nurse, and worked at Rosewood State Hospital for several years. He then received certification as a soil conservationist and worked for the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) for 10 years.

John also started a career as a truck driver. In 1999, John received the Truck Renting and Leasing Association's national "Driver of the Year" award. Only one driver is chosen each year for the prestigious national award. To be considered, the driver must have at least one million miles or 25,000 hours of driving without an accident in which the driver is cited.

John participated in The March on Washington in 1963. As he headed into DC, stories of hatred and police brutality throughout the south filled him with fear. "But as we pushed our way through the crowd, I fell back on my faith and took comfort in it. The massive crowd was so inspiring, it made you feel like, as African-Americans, the rest of the world has our back." John further recalls, "When Dr. King took the podium, trust me, we felt like we were in a dream. When he finished, I felt like the gas tank of a car that had been running on empty, all of a sudden was filled with high octane. I was ready to run the race."

So began years and years of John Lewis' involvement in civil rights activities and leadership of Carroll's Black community. It is difficult to arrange all of them in chronological order, but some with the greatest impact are recounted below.

In 1963, John went to the MD State Legislature with civil rights activist Phyllis Scott and other concerned citizens from Carroll County to testify in support of public accommodations legislation. On the spot, he was selected to give the group's testimony. John recalls, "My heart started pounding, and I asked for the Lord to give me strength. Phyllis advised me to, 'Look like you're examining the crowd and take a deep breath, then talk from your heart and let them know what you think.' I told the story with feeling and compassion. When I finished, they clapped." The Maryland General Assembly passed the public accommodations law in 1963, making it unlawful for a restaurant owner to refuse service to anyone because of race.

Following passage of the law, John and a group of citizens – including Blacks, whites and college students tested it. John recalls, "We visited every restaurant in the county. We were well dressed, well-spoken and well-mannered. Three restaurants refused service, one in New Windsor, one in Union Bridge, and one in Mt. Airy. In all three cases, the customers in the restaurant jumped on the manager, 'why didn't you serve the man a cup of coffee?'" John filed lawsuits against all three restaurants and was successful.

When he worked for the USDA, "we went to a restaurant in Keymar and were told they would not serve a [negro]." The USDA filed a lawsuit and won.

In a *Carroll County Times* article written by Jordan Bartel (5/19/2006), he reports, "The only march was a small one in the early 60s in front of the Carroll Theater that refused to sell tickets to Blacks." John recalls in his interview with Zappardino that, "we were supported by the Baltimore Colts. They threatened to boycott Carroll County if it didn't open things up."

In 1969, John was a charter member and served as the first president of the nonprofit Home Ownership Purchase Effort (HOPE), formed in partnership with the Brethren Church, to provide home ownership opportunities for low income Black families. John notes, "We purchased houses on Union Street from [then] Western Maryland College, rehabbed or rebuilt them and sold them at cost."

In 1999, the Carroll County NAACP Branch (originally established in the 1950s) got its charter back. John took on the role as Membership Chair. "The membership had dwindled to 75 or 80. We didn't have any money in the treasury. My first responsibility was to get funds in order to pay the national and state dues. I called the Board members. We reached into our pockets and paid the dues." John raised the membership to over 250.

John served as NAACP president in 2003-2004. With the help of then Westminster Mayor, Kevin Dayhoff, he was able to arrange for an office in the Nonprofit Center, which opened in 2004. While he was president, he worked to establish a Continuing Education Award to benefit African American college-bound high school students graduating from Carroll County Public Schools.

John helped his community in many ways. He has a beautiful baritone voice. In 1974, he was one of a trio of “Brotherhood Night” singers in a benefit to raise funds to connect Westminster’s Charles Street residents to the city sewer system. In 1976, he played the role of Joe and sang “Old Man River” in September Song’s production of Showboat, to benefit The ARC of Carroll County.

John has worked tirelessly to make Carroll County a welcoming place for all. In 2004, his efforts were recognized at the Carroll County NAACP Freedom Fund Banquet, where he received a Governor’s Citation and a proclamation from then Mayor Kevin Dayhoff honoring John for being “tirelessly compassionate, persistent and always willing to volunteer his wise counsel and hard work,” and proclaiming November 20, 2004, as John Lewis Day in Westminster.

Lynn Wheeler is the Board Chair of the Historical Society of Carroll County

Image 1 caption: John Lewis, photograph by Dylan Slagle. (Submitted photo)

Image 2 caption: John and Jean Lewis at the NAACP Freedom Fund banquet. They have both served as president of the organization. (Submitted photo)