

Gerena Valentins Connection to MLK

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Gerena Valentín's Connection to MLK



[2]In early March, 1968, Gerena Valentín – a pioneer in the creation of coalitions with the principal African American civil rights organizations – received an invitation from Dr. Martin Luther King to attend a meeting in Atlanta, Ga. The purpose was to create a broad movement that would include all the minority groups in the United States to demand that the U.S. Congress pass a bill supporting economic rights for minorities.

In his recent memoir, *Gilberto Gerena Valentín: My Life as a Community Activist, Labor Organizer, And Progressive Politician in New York City*, he writes about how at that 1968 meeting, which precipitated what came to be called The Poor People's March on Washington, Gerena Valentín stressed the situation and needs of Puerto Ricans living on the mainland. Dr. King put Gerena Valentín in charge of organizing the Puerto Rican contingent in the Northeast for the march, and it was a job that Gerena Valentín eagerly accepted.

The celebration of the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on January 20 is a solicitous time to review the central role Gerena Valentín played in civil rights, in the mobilization of Puerto Ricans for the famed marches on Washington in 1963 and 1968 and to reflect on his relationship with the legendary civil rights leader. His memoir also addresses the contributions other Puerto Ricans made to the civil rights movement in general.

Gerena Valentín’s relationship with Dr. King had started early in the decade when his Congreso de Pueblos coordinated a contingent of Puerto Ricans from the East Coast to take part in the 1963 March on Washington, when Dr. King presented his I Have a Dream speech.

Gerena Valentín writes about the Puerto Rican involvement in Dr. King’s campaign in the early 1960s against the literacy tests and poll taxes, which kept blacks from voting in the South. Puerto Rican activists from New York were there with blacks from the South in the struggle for fair voting rights. “If the way Puerto Ricans were treated at the voting booth in New York was discriminatory, the blacks in the South faced a much worse situation,” he states.

“In 1965, these efforts by blacks, joined by Puerto Ricans, led Congress, against the staunch opposition of Southern congressmen, to pass the historic Voting Rights Acts,” he recollects.

In June, 1966, to promote black voter registration across the South, James Meredith, who had won a legal battle with the support of the National Association of Colored People to allow him to register at the University of Mississippi, began a one-man march called the March Against Fear from Memphis, Tenn. to Jackson, Miss. After learning that Meredith had been wounded by a sniper a day after beginning his march, several major black civil rights leaders, including Dr. King, decided to continue the march in solidarity with Meredith and they invited others to join. The black leadership in New York City, specifically Milton Galamison, invited Gerena Valentín and fellow Puerto Rican activists to join them. They marched for four days and nights. Along the way, Gerena Valentín met several young black leaders who later became national political leaders, including Stokely Carmichael.

During the voter registration march, Gerena Valentín remembers how Southern white racists referred to poor whites, blacks and Puerto Ricans with derogatory names and how Puerto Rican protesters were treated the same as blacks by these racists. He also recollects how the black leadership in New York thanked the Puerto Rican activists for their participation, and Rev. Galamison publicly recognized their contribution in the historic march.

Two years later Gerena Valentín received the invitation from Dr. King to attend the meeting in Atlanta. Recalling the years between the first march and the second one, Gerena Valentín writes: “Now, five years after his famous I Have a Dream speech, Dr. King had become more radicalized, and his perspective had broadened.” King, he remembers, “...wanted to join together all the struggles, such as the opposition to the Vietnam War, not just those related to the ‘Negro problem’. He was seeking to create a multiracial and multiethnic coalition that would go straight to the root of the problem: the unequal distribution of wealth.”

Then King was killed. “Barely three weeks after my return (to New York),” the memoirist recalls, “the

terrible event we are all familiar with occurred: On April 4, Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, by a white racist.” At the time he was assassinated in Memphis, Dr. King was involved in one of his greatest plans to spotlight the plight of all the poor and his assassination was a great loss to Gerena Valentín.

Today Martin Luther King’s birthday is celebrated as a national day of service to



[3]honor his legacy with community action that helps solve social problems.

For more about Gerena Valentín, visit our Centro Store at <http://goo.gl/x2j9Eg> [3] to order his memoir available in English and Spanish.

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