

Legacy of a Civil Rights Icon - Hank Thomas

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Freedom Rider Hank Thomas: Anniston's place in my life

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Hank Thomas | 0 comments

When I boarded the Greyhound bus in Washington, D.C., May 4, 1961, headed south, I was in search of my American dream — that elusive dream, the dream that the Declaration of Independence's reference to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" included me, a coming-of-age black man.

On Sunday, May 14, Mother's Day in Anniston, I received my wake-up call.

The ugliness of that fateful day is well chronicled. The 14 of us on board barely escaped with our lives. As the bus was burning, men from the mob, who had just firebombed the bus, were holding the door to prevent our escape. They wanted to burn us alive. They had brought along wives and children to witness our deaths. What had we done that was so terrible? Could they have thought they were doing the right thing? Were we a threat to what they perceived as "their way of life?" Did they believe that killing us would make them heroes in Anniston?

Where were you, the good-hearted people of Anniston, when these bullies set upon us? Why did you allow it to happen? Were you as afraid of them as we were? Yet, there was one kind and brave one among you, a little 12-year-old girl, Janie, who brought water and administered to our needs. I believe that she was the messenger, God's little angel of love. This is what I remember first when I recall Anniston. Because of "little Janie," I looked, again, toward the future. I left Anniston with a resolve to learn why God spared my life that day.

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My near-murder in Anniston was a watershed event in my life. I resolved to become successful, to make a difference for my family and the world. I've often wondered about the men in the mob. What have their lives been like since? Has life been kind to them? Do they brag today about their exploits on that day? Did any of them serve their country in battle? Would any ever apologize?

In 1963, I was drafted into the Army. I served in Vietnam as a medic. I spent 5 1/2 months in Walter Reed Army Hospital recuperating from wounds sustained in Vietnam. While there, I had much time to reflect on my past, and I let go of the bitterness and hate I had harbored. I knew that the Spirit of God had played a major role in my life, and that more was in store.

I have long since forgiven the men in the mob that day. Maybe it's time they forgive themselves. Will I ever meet any of the men from the mob in Anniston? I've returned to Vietnam and broken bread with my former enemy. I've hosted former Vietnamese soldiers in my home. Will this ever happen with my former combatants from Anniston? Will any of them ever offer the olive branch?

I have obtained my American dream. I have been successful in business; my wife and I own three McDonald's restaurants and three Marriott Hotels. I am blessed with a wonderful wife, two lovely daughters, four grandchildren and one great-grandchild. I've had a good life; I am a man in full. God is good, and through his mercy, I have **OVERCOME!**

Hank Thomas is one of two surviving Freedom Riders on the Greyhound bus that was firebombed outside Anniston on May 14, 1961. He now lives in Atlanta. He and Janie Forsyth McKinney ("little Janie") will attend the unveiling of a mural and memorial signage at 9 a.m. today at the former site of the Greyhound bus station, 1031 Gurnee Ave.