

Legacy of a Civil Rights Icon - Hank Thomas

September 2011 The Daily Home

Original Freedom Rider tells his story at Talladega College

Posted: Friday, September 9, 2011 12:00 am

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TALLADEGA — Original Freedom Rider Dr. Henry “Hank” Thomas spoke about reconciliation at Talladega College’s Opening Fall Convocation ceremonies Thursday. Thomas was one of 14 original Freedom Riders that fought to change Jim Crow laws in the South. He was arrested 22 times during the Civil Rights movement for civil disobedience, and was awarded the Purple Heart for his service in the Vietnam War. Thomas was a recent guest on the Oprah Winfrey Show where Winfrey referred to him as an “American hero.”

The convocation ceremonies began with an invocation led by Harold A. Franklin. Franklin became the first black student to attend Auburn University on Jan. 4, 1964. Dr. Arthur Bacon then came to the podium to reflect on his involvement with the Civil Rights movement. Bacon read a poem he wrote that dealt with an incident at the Anniston train station. An incident that he said began a change in the South. Talladega College president Dr. Billy Hawkins then addressed the student body. A video highlighting Thomas’ accomplishments was shown, and Hawkins introduced him to those in attendance.

Thomas began his speech by saying that he was “honored, flattered and humbled to be asked to speak.” He then introduced his wife, saying, “She played the music that made me dance.”

Thomas then spoke about the journey of the Freedom Riders. He said in May of 1961, 14 people left on two buses headed for New Orleans, La. Of those 14 people, seven were black and seven were white. He said they were riding to challenge the Jim Crow laws. He said of the 436 Freedom Riders across the country that half were black and half were white.

Thomas talked about an incident in May of 1961 where the Freedom Riders’ bus was

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attacked by an angry mob and set on fire in Anniston. The event later became known as the Anniston Bus Burning. He said when the mob began to break the windows out of the bus, he knew it was a serious situation. Then the fire caused the fuel tank on the bus to explode. Thomas, who was 19 at the time, thought he was going to die that day. With the bus on fire and an angry mob waiting on him outside, Thomas said he inhaled smoke from the burning bus to try to “put himself to sleep.” Thomas was pulled from the bus and, after being beaten by the angry mob, was put in an ambulance and taken to the hospital.

Earlier this year, Thomas was invited back to Anniston. He said he was happy the blacks and whites of Anniston had come together.

“I appreciate the fact that old people are now free to be friends with each other,” said Thomas.

Thomas was once sentenced to six months in the Mississippi State Penitentiary for using a “whites only” restroom in the city of Jackson. He and other Freedom Riders returned to Jackson this past May to celebrate the 50 year anniversary of the movement. He said that, this time, blacks and whites were united at the celebration.

Thomas said people ask him why he became a freedom rider. He said that if he had been 19 years old in 1942 that he would have been a Tuskegee Airman and if he had been 19 in 1972 that he would have been a Buffalo Soldier, but the year was 1961, so he was a Freedom Rider.

Thomas said that now, 50 years later, he has had a chance to reflect on the many honors he has received and the recognition of the sacrifices he made. “My dreams of old have not been tarnished,” he said.

Of the 14 original Freedom Riders, only five are still alive. Thomas said that his memories were all that he had left, and that his memories always stay with him. He said, in his mind, he revisits places like Anniston, Birmingham and Selma.

Thomas said that age and years have “slowed his step,” and that his twilight was here, but he enjoyed fighting for freedom in his youth.

In closing, Thomas said of the Freedom Riders, “We saw something wrong and decided to do something right.”

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