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FEATURED

Martha Davis Baptist group tours historic Civil Rights sites

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A group from Martha Davis Baptist Church in Jefferson County poses at the Freedom Monument Sculpture Park in Montgomery, Alabama.

Last month, a group from Martha Davis Baptist Church in Jefferson City embarked on a historic Civil Rights tour, visiting some of the locations that played key roles in the American Civil Rights Movement, including landmarks in Birmingham, Montgomery, Lowndes County and Selma.

Roxanne Bowen, Director of Belonging Access in Success in Education/Counselor at Walters State Community College, said ”the trip was powerful and informative.”

“The trip was absolutely amazing. I love history, but I was still able to learn so much,” she said. “The way the museums are set up is wonderful. The exhibits are beautiful in a heartbreaking and painful way.”

The group’s journey began in Birmingham at the 16th Street Baptist Church where a terrorist bombing killed four young girls in September of 1963. As many as 22 other people were injured by the bomb which was made of 19 sticks of dynamite and planted by members of the Ku Klux Klan.

From there the tour continued down Interstate 65 to the state capital of Montgomery where they visited the Rosa Parks Museum. Parks, who refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus to a white person, was arrested and played an important role in the Montgomery Bus Boycott from December 1955 to December of 1956.

At the museum, the group rode a dramatic simulation attraction designed to transport them back in time with immersive sound, lighting, and hydraulics—bringing to life the pivotal events sparked by Parks’ stand.

In Montgomery, they visited the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, The Freedom Monument Sculpture Park, the Legacy Museum and the Civil Rights Museum.

“These experiences offered deep insight into America’s legacy of racial injustice, resistance, and resilience,” wrote the Rev. Johnny Jones, the pastor of Martha Davis Baptist Church.

Leaving Montgomery, the group first toured the Lowndes Interpretive Center, learning about the critical role the county played in the voting rights movement. Then, in Selma, they visited the historic Brown Chapel AME Church which played a pivotal role in the Movement serving as

a staging area for protests, a sanctuary and a house of worship where the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke and preached from the pulpit.

The group marched across the infamous Edmund Pettus Bridge, which was the location of the Bloody Sunday March in 1965 in which protestors were mercilessly beaten and attacked by members of local and state law enforcement as well as possemen.

It also played key roles in two subsequent marches led by King, including the famous Selma-to-Montgomery March.

While in Alabama, Jones held an active listening session to engage in dialogue about the experiences and emotional impact of the recent dramatic tour. The session focused on hearing from participants across various age groups, offering a safe and thoughtful space for reflection, feedback, and healing. Attendees shared how the tour affected them personally, shedding light on the diverse responses and perspectives within the community.

Jonah Hoard, included with the group of youth between the ages 8-16 expressed his thoughts that, ‘black people are not getting treated fairly.’”

Zion McCarthy, a 16-year-old student, reflected on the historic fact that lead to the recognition of Juneteenth, ‘they freed the slaves during Emancipation; they knew we couldn’t read; it wasn’t until June 19, 1865, that all slaves were freed.”

The 21-40 age group reflected on the sculptures and other facts on display at the various exhibits.

Ariel Claiborne, one of the young ladies in that age group, said ‘the names on the wall, we found our last names. We take education for granted.” She added that she was affected by the slave quarters exhibits.

The 40-70 age group agreed simultaneously about the struggle for the right to vote.

One member of that group, Lisa Ward stated that she never voted until she was 58 years old. She had never voted but always said, “they didn’t do anything for us.” She added that she “learned to open my voice.”

In a dialogue that was described as “heartfelt and honest,” a group of elderly adults aged 70 and above also gathered to reflect on the enduring truth stated by Ann Bowen, “If you don’t vote, you have no reason to complain.” Many shared lived experiences that underscored the high cost of progress and the deep roots of the fight for freedom and representation.

Jones said the group included a person, Dr. Priscilla Treece-Johnson, who integrated West High School, highlighting the fact that the history being learned wasn’t that long ago. Deacon Ed Langston, a military veteran on the trip reflected on the lingering effects of oppression in the face of sacrifice and faith.

“These reflections are not just personal, they are collective echoes of resilience, pain, dignity, and hope,” Jones said. “They remind us that the right to vote was not freely given—it was fiercely fought for. And the struggle, as they said, is far from over.”

On Sunday morning, the group returned to Selma and Brown Chapel where Jones delivered a sermon while the Martha Davis Choir provided the music.

While in Selma, Roxanne Bowen and some others were able to visit with Joanne Bland, a Selma luminary who at 14 was the youngest participant in the Bloody Sunday March of 1965. Bland had visited Morristown previously as guest speaker at the annual Task Force for Diversity’s Martin Luther King Jr. Day breakfast.

Bowen said it was heartwarming to get to spend more time with the legendary Bland.

Dr. Alpha Alexander agreed.

“It just warmed my heart,” she said. “Here I am, being an older woman, and I had a chance to be on the site where all this history took place. Having the opportunity to meet with Joanne Bland in Selma and be at the church where Martin Luther King spoke, it really warmed my heart.”