

Civil rights leader recalls Macomb days

The Rev. C.T. Vivian visits his old schools as part of Constitution Week

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MACOMB — In celebration of national Constitution Week, former Macomb resident and civil rights activist the Rev. Dr. C.T. Vivian visited Edison Elementary and Macomb High School on Friday to share his life story.

As part of HistoryMakers, the nation's largest black video oral history archive, Vivian was able to return to his old stomping grounds, taking particular pleasure in visiting his former school buildings in Macomb, which he refers to as "my town."

But life wasn't always easy here for Vivian - he recalled events that eventually shaped his life while attending Macomb schools.

"I was treated really well - when I was in school, I was president of this and president of that, all that kind of stuff," he said. "What I saw was this: the difference between the generations. The kids treated me differently."

Vivian recalled a white friend telling him that his classmates wished Vivian could come to a party but their parents wouldn't allow it.

"You have to work through differences in school together," said Vivian of the lesson he learned from the experience. "You would hate to think that kids that like you would grow up to exclude you."

Through experiences like that, Vivian learned to look forward and think of a better future for himself and African Americans and acceptance of others.

"Everybody is not like the person refusing me now; everybody is not like the person calling me a name," he said, sharing his positive attitude for the future.

After graduating from Macomb and Western Illinois University, a teachers college at the time, Vivian knew he had to get away to work as a professional.

"I went from here to Peoria as a matter of living," he recalled. "I was at a teachers college and had never seen a black teacher. I went through school and there were no African-American teachers. You were hoping that somewhere there was a place you could get a job. I went to Peoria and it was the same."

Instead of teaching, Vivian began facing civil rights issues for African Americans. He became involved in NAACP activity while the Caterpillar Inc. plant was being established, fighting for black workers to have professional jobs other than as janitors.

Vivian also served as boys director of Carver Community Center, which at the time was the largest community center for African Americans between Chicago and St. Louis. Through his perseverance, Vivian became highly active in the Civil Rights Movement, befriending the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and serving on his executive staff. From Nashville to Selma, Vivian stood against discrimination, finding his profession in civil rights and making a name for himself across the nation and world.

The main message Vivian hoped to share with students was that they have a never-ending array of possibilities ahead of them, thanks to the strong education they are receiving now.

"You are the most fortunate people in the world - you have the best school system in the world, and you can go as far as you want to as long as you want to," he said. "You can become anything you want to be, and everybody wants you to succeed. In fact, our nation depends upon your success: That's the real message."

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