



On Monday, April 25, longtime friend of Facing History Rev. Samuel “Billy” Kyles, 81, passed away. Below, [Steve Becton](#) reflects on the man who inspired students throughout Memphis.

“Billy” Kyles Inspired a New Generation of Dreamers

“Hold on to dreams for if dreams die life is a like a broken-winged bird that cannot fly.”

--Langston Hughes

That was a favorite quote of our recently departed and forever beloved foot soldier for justice, Reverend Samuel Billy Kyles. We at Facing History and Ourselves had the honor of sitting in front row seats as Rev. Kyles inspired thousands of youth across our community to continue to hold on to their dreams.

Reverend Kyles grew up at a time when all black folks had was dreams. He grew up at a time when a nation torn by legalized racial segregation was being challenged to live up to its promises of freedom and democracy for all. He joined a movement that would require he and others to be bullied, beaten, attacked by dogs, blasted by water hoses, and even lynched by mobs. He had great reason to lose faith but when he spoke to students he challenged them to hold on to their dreams. He spoke of hope, not despair. He spoke of progress, not barriers. He spoke of courage, not fear. He built bridges across communities. He asked kids to face how far we have yet to go, but to appreciate how far we have come. He spoke with candor and with well-placed humor. That smile, almost a smirk, could put you at ease even when discussing very painful history.

When speaking on the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow he refused to leave students yoked, cynical, or hopeless. He would say, “in spite of brutal and inhumane conditions slaves dreamed! They dreamed that their children could one day be President of the free world.” He went on to explain that “because slaves dreamed, in less than 150 years from being in bondage, a few generations from it being *illegal* for black folks to read we have had *two* African Americans serve as Secretary of State, an African American President, and a holiday named after an African American Civil Rights Leader.”

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“Rev. Kyles was such an uplifting storyteller,” said Michelle Phillips, Associate Director for Facing History and Ourselves, Memphis. “I recall him talking to students about the courage and resilience of African Americans. He talked about how soul food started from taking unwanted table scraps and turning them into a delicacy. He jokingly talked about how people now line up

and pay big bucks for chitlins, greens, and cornbread. The students would laugh but more importantly they would get the deeper meaning: in the face of demoralizing and inhumane conditions African Americans never lost their hope, their spirits, or their genius. He refused to let students be yoked by history but to find great pride in their tradition. He challenged them to keep dreaming.”

We are again in such a pivotal moment in our country’s struggle for freedom and equality for all. In spite of incredible progress, race has again come to the forefront as the seemingly unconquerable difference that keeps our nation divided. Many groups are feeling more vulnerable than ever as we struggle to become a more inclusive community.

Faced with such challenges it’s sad to lose one of our moral leaders like Rev. Kyles. Yet we are again reminded of something he once said: “Pioneers are not always around to walk the trails that they blaze.” We obviously have more trails for justice to blaze. Trails that sadly, Rev. Kyles will not be here to walk. But he has done his part. He leaves a legacy of students who he inspired to see the best in others and imagine the world that he fought for, lived for, and was willing to even die for. He inspired the next generation of dreamers.

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