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Lawrence University

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Civil Rights Legend John Lewis Speaks at Lawrence University Convocation

Posted on: February 1st, 2005 by Rick Peterson

U.S. Congressman John Lewis of Georgia, a leading figure on the front lines of this nation's civil rights movement, speaks on the importance of student activism and involvement in the protection of human rights and civil liberties in America Tuesday, Feb. 8 in the third installment of Lawrence University's 2004-05 convocation series.

Hailed as "a genuine American hero" for his courage in the face of discrimination and human injustice, Lewis delivers the address "Get in the Way" at 11:10 a.m. in the Lawrence University Memorial Chapel.

The son of Alabama sharecroppers, Lewis, 64, grew up in the segregated South of the 1940s and '50s, a time when signs for "Whites" and "Colored" were commonplace. Inspired by radio news broadcasts of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his message of peaceful reform, Lewis committed himself at an early age to human rights activism.

While attending Fisk University, Lewis organized sit-in demonstrations at segregated lunch counters in Nashville and participated in the famed "Freedom Rides" of the early 1960s, occupying bus seats reserved for whites only. At the age of 23, he became chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, helping organize student activism and earning recognition as one of the "Big Six" leaders of the civil rights movement, joining King, Whitney Young, A. Phillip Randolph, James Farmer and Roy Wilkins.

As SNCC chairman, Lewis was a principal architect of, and a keynote speaker at, the March on Washington in August 1963, in

which King delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Two years later, Lewis led a march for voters’ rights in Alabama that ended in violence when marchers were attacked by state troopers in a brutal confrontation that became known as “Bloody Sunday.” News accounts of the event helped speed the passage of the Voting Rights Act later that same year.

Lewis entered public politics in 1981 with his election to the Atlanta City Council. He joined the U.S. Congress in 1986 and has represented Georgia’s Fifth Congressional District in Washington the past 19 years.

Profiled in a 1975 Time magazine article entitled “Saints Among Us,” Lewis’ efforts on behalf of human rights and civil liberties have been recognized with numerous awards, including the Martin Luther King, Jr. Non-Violent Peace Prize, the John F. Kennedy “Profile in Courage Award” for lifetime achievement, the NAACP Spingarn Medal for outstanding achievement and the National Education Association Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Award.

Lewis earned a bachelor’s degree in religion and philosophy from Fisk University and is a graduate of the American Baptist Theological Seminary. In addition, he has been recognized with nearly a dozen honorary degrees from Duke, Harvard and Princeton universities, among others.

His biography, “Walking With The Wind: A Memoir of the Movement,” was published in 1998.