

## The Untold Story of Civil Rights Activist Arthur Burnett

On the third Monday of each year, schools and places of work across the United States close in observance of Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK Jr.) Day, a federal holiday celebrating the life of civil rights activist and freedom fighter Dr. King. While most of us look forward to our three-day weekend, it is also important to reflect on the principles of racial equality and nonviolent social change Dr. King fought so hard for.

To celebrate MLK Jr. day this year, I sat down for an exclusive interview with someone who epitomizes these ideals: Honorable Arthur L. Burnett Sr. retired Judge of the District of Columbia Superior Court and the first African American to be appointed as a United States Magistrate. His story is one of bravery, passion, and perseverance.

On first impression, I was struck by Burnett's mastery of language and communication. Despite his age, he was incredibly eloquent and spoke with purpose. At no time during the interview did I find myself lost or confused. Of course, after looking at his impressive resume, this comes as no surprise. Just as notable was his remarkably humble attitude. After achieving so much in his life, Burnett was still dedicated and motivated to accomplish more.

Growing up in the segregated south and being a person of color, Burnett had to work twice as hard for opportunities. As a youth, he excelled in school and was encouraged to attend the Tuskegee Institute for farming. By thirteen, however, he had already become a youth minister, preaching sermons and leading Sunday service prayer about justice and equality. This intense faith pushed him towards a career in law, where he hoped to "bring the principles of the lord to everyday life." Despite being repeatedly discouraged and ignored by peers, Burnett forged ahead to achieve this goal.

At Howard University, Judge Burnett pursued a double major in political science and economics, and continued to excel as a student. Burnett's eloquence and work ethic landed him an opportunity to meet the legendary civil rights attorney Thurgood Marshall, who had just succeeded in characterizing segregated education as unconstitutional. Marshall offered Burnett an accelerated path to law school and the opportunity to be the first African American to test the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka decision in the South. He agreed on one condition.

*"In the summers between my couple years in law school, I would come back to Howard so I could receive a degree from Howard University with recognition of my talents and intellect. I wanted to show that a colored kid can be as great as a white kid anywhere in America".*

Eventually, Burnett would graduate from Howard as one of the highest-ranking students in the University's history. Simultaneously, with legal help from Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP, Burnett's case to attend law school in the 'deep South' was ongoing. This process was difficult and dangerous.

*“During the time of October ‘54 to April ‘55, I lived under death threats. They would have two marshalls living with me 24 hours a day to keep me alive because, at that point, the rebellious south was rebelling to such a point that they were even abducting and committing lynchings of blacks that tried to influence or carry out the brown decision”.*

While this initial attempt at admitting a Black student into an institution in the South was unsuccessful, Burnett did earn acceptance to New York University’s Law School with two full scholarships. He was the only colored student in his classes and was constantly called on to answer questions.

*“They treated me as if I had come from outer space. As if I wasn’t even an American”.*

Despite this, Burnett still stood out as exceptional and graduated with stellar grades.

With a strong grasp of the law, a sharp intellect, and a passion for “ensuring that the Lady liberty is blind”, he turned his attention to the American Justice System, where he sought to begin working immediately toward change. This opportunity didn’t take long to find him.

With Bobby Kennedy designated as its Attorney General, the new Kennedy administration needed a special assistant and felt that Burnett was an ideal choice.

*“Bobby said to me ‘In my whole life I’ve never met a colored person who has the kind of academic record you have”.*

As special assistant to the Kennedy administration, Burnett was responsible for monitoring the civil rights movement and ensuring its protection from outside organizations as well as government agencies such as the FBI. Because of the nature of this position, however, most of Burnett’s tasks were completed in secrecy.

*“I couldn’t even talk to my wife about what I was doing. I became the monitor of the civil rights movement on Jan 21, 1961. I became the special assistant to Bobby Kennedy where everyone thought I was his personal servant”*

Burnett even compared the role to that of a CIA agent in its importance and discretion.

*“I pretended to be just a gopher. Indeed, I even came in on Saturdays and walked the dog. And that worked”.*

Over time, Bobby Kennedy began to rely heavily on Burnett. So much so that upon the assassination of his brother, Kennedy first contacted Burnett for support.

*“He said to me ‘Arthur my brother’s just been killed. I want you to be with me because I’m just too emotional.’”*

Burnett took on the responsibility of steering the nation in a time of distress and confusion.

*“He made me raise my right hand and said “I hear by deputize you to be acting attorney general for me for the day. I want you to be on the phone with the people in Dallas, Texas, giving the directions I would have given if I wasn’t so emotional”. I spent the next 12 hours with Bobby Kennedy being the voice on the phone directing the FBI.”*

This display of bravery and commitment cemented Burnett as a leader in the department of justice and while humbly staying behind the scene without drawing attention to himself.

For the next few years, he continued serving as a presidential advisor, ensuring the protection of the civil rights movement and its members. In fact, when Martin Luther King Jr. gave his famous “I have a dream” speech in Washington on August 28, 1963, it was Burnett serving as an undercover agent to protect against race riots and violence. Not something that is recorded in our history books.

*“I had a direct line to the president to call the national guard or the marshalls. I spent 16 hours a day that week in the crowd where people thought I was a young groupie. I was just 27 years of age. I got as close to Martin Luther King as only to be four or five feet away from him as he was giving his speech”.*

Eventually, Burnett rose to the position of Senior Prosecutor in the U.S. Attorney’s office. At the time, there were only two Black assistant U.S. attorneys. However, even in this position of authority, Burnett continued to face prejudice and intolerance.

*“The first day I was a prosecutor, I went to the courtroom. I was sitting at the prosecutor’s table. The judge came on the bench and looked over at the prosecutor’s side and he said to me “boy you’re at the wrong table.” He assumed I was a Negro defendant. That was a very embarrassing moment but also a very enlightening one”.*

As a senior official, Burnett watched over the dealings of police in Washington D.C. like a hawk, protecting the rights of protesters and civil rights advocates. Following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968, his role became incredibly important as the city was submerged into violence, rioting, and looting. Once again, during a time of chaos, Burnett’s

sharp thinking and willpower helped guide our nation all while not seeking or drawing public attention or awareness.

Because of his leadership, he was selected as the first African American federal Magistrate in June 1969.

To Burnett, this was not just a promotion, but a way to continue fighting for the liberties and freedoms of African American citizens. He became a leader in judicial reforms and a constitutional law expert, pioneering the development of clear guidelines for search and seizure to prevent police from infringing on citizen's rights. He was also the lead lawyer in handling the civil service reform act to eliminate civil rights violations. Under President Jimmy Carter, he supervised the overhauling of the department of education to be a more fair system as well.

In each of these objectives, Burnett was driven by an inherent desire to use his power and voice to spark change.

*“When I was in the army I didn’t realize it but I was tested as having an IQ of 153. God gave me this gift. He’s given me the drive and zeal. I must do what I must do and this is my mission in life, to prove and set the example that regardless of race, regardless of religion, individuals should be judged and evaluated, and treated based on their individual talents and abilities. It should be equal treatment and equal respect”.*

At 87 years old, Judge Arthur Burnett continues to work daily towards change at the federal level.

*“My wife says “you’re supposed to be retired but you still work 16 hours a day”. As long as the lord keeps me in good health, I’m going to keep what I’m doing. I’m not out to be a multi-millionaire, I’m out to change this world. I have a mission like Mahatma Gandhi or a mission like Martin Luther King Jr., to improve the quality of life on earth so that there would be total equality”.*

Most recently, he has partnered with the Biden administration to help better police interactions with the Black community. As the Executive Director of the National African American Drug Policy Coalition, he is also working to develop policy that addresses the ongoing opioid epidemic.

Although the world may be very different now than it was during the pinnacle of the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King’s teachings about equality and tolerance are still ever-relevant. In telling the story of Judge Arthur Burnett and celebrating the lives of those who fought for these ideals, we can ensure that King’s message of equality, kindness, and justice lives on.