

# Senior storytellers to recount Civil Rights era

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**A**MERICANS younger than 25 take for granted that the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr. is observed with a national holiday in January and that February is designated as Black History Month.

But their parents and grandparents knew another United States.

Young Americans accept the notion of equal rights for blacks, of a thriving black middle class, of black millionaires and CEOs.

They equate the Civil Rights Movement with that dried-up subject, "history," connected primarily with the names of the Dr. King and Rosa Parks, the woman who would not give up her seat on the bus in 1955 and whose brave action is credited with inspiring the resistance movement across the south. Parks died last year.

But older Americans know the movement first-hand. Young in the 1950s and '60s, they read in daily newspapers and saw live on TV the non-violent resistance of thousands of black and sympathetic whites who were harassed, tear-gassed, beaten, chased by dogs, arrested and even killed in the name of segregation.

Many of these older Americans lived during the "Jim Crow" era in the South, when blacks drank from separate water fountains, used separate entrances, were prohibited from entering certain restaurants, hotels, even hospitals. They were harassed if they walked on the wrong side of the street, spat on if they tried to enter all-white schools. Their parents, and sometimes they themselves, witnessed lynchings and burnings.

What many young Americans would consider today as impossible, their grandparents' generation experienced. And it wasn't so very long ago.

Now, local audiences will have an opportunity to hear first-hand experiences when Oakland-based Stagebridge, the nation's oldest senior theater company, presents "Civil Rights Tales," stories of the civil rights movement told by people who lived them, at 11 a.m. Saturday, Feb. 4, at the Menlo Park City Council Chambers, 801 Laurel St.

A small cast, ranging in age from their 60s to their 80s, will tell stories, from both sides, black and white, said Liz Nichols, storytelling director of Stagebridge and moderator of the production. Bay Area residents, the storytellers grew up elsewhere — and all experi-



enced segregation.

"The tales are prepared, but not memorized. They're not performing, they're sharing stories of their lives," she said. "The speakers tell it from the heart."

One black man, now an attorney in his 60s, recalls the time he worked as a young newspaper delivery boy and realized that only the black newsboys were required to unload heavy blocks of newspapers from trucks for waiting white newsboys. He decided to organize his fellow black newsboys for equal rights, and learned something.

After the program, audience members are invited to share their own stories.

A recent performance of "Civil Rights Tales" at Menlo Park Senior Center was met with a "heartwarming response," Nichols said. Other Bay Area performances are scheduled during February, Black History Month.

"Attention to the Civil Rights Movement focuses on Martin



**LEATHA WILLIAMS**, one of the Stagebridge storytellers, shares some of her memories (above), while two of her fellow storytellers listen. Andy Montgomery (left) talks about the fight for equality in San Jose. Stagebridge, from Oakland, is the nation's oldest senior theater company. It presents stories of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s, told by the people who lived through the struggle. The Storytellers performed at the Menlo Park Senior Center during its celebration in honor of Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday.

STUART KANDELL

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Luther King and Rosa Parks, but many in the community lived through the changes, and also fought in their own ways for civil rights," Nichols said.

"If these people don't tell their stories, the history and their participation will be lost. The movement that changed the country involved a lot of ordi-

nary people, and in this production, they share what it was like to be living in those days."

Stagebridge has been performing for more than 20 years. For information on Stagebridge or to find a schedule of future performances, check the Web site [www.stagebridge.org](http://www.stagebridge.org) or call (510) 444-4755. Free van

service is available for Menlo Park seniors and people with disabilities. To schedule transportation call 330-2512.

The performance is sponsored by Friends of the Menlo Park Library.

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