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## Mel King adds another award to his crowded mantelpiece

by Aviva Gat  
MySouthEnd.com Contributor  
Sunday Dec 13, 2009



South End activist Mel King (far left), standing with his wife Joyce, received an award presented by longtime friend Gus Newport (second from right) for his lifetime of community activism as UUSC Vice President Constance Kane (far right) watched on Thursday night at Roxbury Community College. (Source:Aviva Gat)

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lives with his wife of 58 years, Joyce. "We had an agreement."

King organized a sit-in on April 25 and for the next few days hundred of protestors built tents, set up barbeques and put up signs welcoming visitors to "Tent City." Celtics legend Bill Russell donated food to the squatters and the Episcopal Diocese donated \$10,000 to their cause, eventually leading the BRA to abandon its plan. Eventually, 269 units of mixed-income housing were built on the site where King encouraged everyone to take a stand, and a life of service took off.

"It was not about what I had to do," said King. "It's about what hundreds of people did."

Tent City is merely one example of King's lifetime dedication to helping

### Unitarian Universalist Service Committee recognizes King with human rights award

In 1968 The Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA), in an era of "urban renewal," wanted to pave the area between Dartmouth Street and Columbus Avenue and put up a parking lot. The BRA wanted to evict the mostly minority tenants of the area, without providing them with a new place to live. Mel King, a resident threatened with losing his home, decided to fight back.

"They were displacing people who wanted to remain in the neighborhood," said King, 81, who was born in the South End, where he still

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others, which is why the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC) decided to honor King with its Eleanor Roosevelt Human Rights Award at its second annual Rights Night on Thursday night, Dec. 10, at Roxbury Community College.

"Mel, in his lifetime, exemplifies that you can mobilize people and effect social change," said Charlie Clements, the president and CEO of UUSC. "He has done this repeatedly. Look at Boston and you can see Mel's fingerprints on many areas."

After organizing the Tent City protest, King ran for office and represented the 9th Suffolk District in the Massachusetts Legislature from 1973 to 1982. During his tenure King advocated for more equality among classes and races. He also fought to change the way the Boston City Council was set up. Before 1981 all councilors were elected at-large, rather than by districts. This favored whites and King wanted to see more minorities running for political office so he sought to change the council to include district representatives. In 1981 voters approved legislation that changed the council to include nine district representatives and four at-large members.

King again shook up Boston politics in 1983 when he lost a close mayoral race to City Councilor Ray Flynn, leading to the headline in *Time Magazine* "Boston Wins by a Landslide." The article detailed the number of whites who crossed the color line in a historically racist city to vote for a black candidate over his white counterpart.

"What's changed is the attitudes among race and class," said King, who believes that even though these attitudes have changed, people are still not intermingling. "My thing is those of us who appreciate learning about people should just keep continuing to do that and maybe others will catch on."

The UUSC, a nonsectarian organization that fights for universal human rights, holds its annual Rights Night on the anniversary of the proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted on Dec. 10, 1948. Clements said UUSC hopes to make this celebration a Boston tradition by honoring those who live up to Roosevelt's quest for human rights. Last year UUSC honored Rev. Gloria White-Hammond, who served as a medical missionary in several African countries.

After the UUSC board unanimously selected King to receive this year's award, Clements approached King, who was baffled at why anyone would want to honor him.

"Why?" King asked when he heard the news. Clements told King the UUSC would invite anyone he wanted to present the award to him. Maybe he wanted Governor Deval Patrick or Mayor Thomas Menino?

The one person King wanted was his longtime friend and colleague, Gus Newport. King and Newport met in 1979 at the International Liaison Forum conference in Mexico City where they were assigned as roommates. Newport, who had recently been elected mayor of Berkeley, California, said they hit it off right away. King, who was a "giant of a man," started telling Newport about the Community Fellows Program he founded as a professor of Urban Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and immediately asked him to come be a part of it. From 2006 to 2008 Newport was a Martin Luther King, Jr. Fellow at MIT.

"Mel always believed in community from a holistic standpoint," said Newport, the former director of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative. "He never once takes credit for anything."

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While presenting the award Newport compared King to Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., the first African American to serve in the United States House of Representatives. Like King, Powell fought for minorities and social equality.

"He is a quiet giant who is concerned with human kind," said Newport.

King came to accept his award in a purple corduroy jumpsuit. Around his neck he wore a red clay pendant with a yellow fish that his granddaughter, now 24, made when she was about eight.

"Nobody makes something happen on their own," said King while accepting the award. "It's been a privilege to be involved in a community like the South End."

Recent mayoral candidate Sam Yoon credited his career to King's support on Thursday night.

"At the beginning of my first campaign we sat down at a coffee shop in the South End for hot chocolate and I asked for advice: should I even think about running for city office in Boston?" said Yoon. "His response was not to answer whether I should run, but how and why."

Yoon, who received King's endorsement for his 2009 mayor candidacy, said there are many missing human rights, like the right to a quality education, clean water or affordable housing.

"Having grown up as an Asian American, having worked as a community organizer, I do feel qualified to talk about missing rights," he said. "Let's consider those missing rights and how to make them a reality in Boston."

Yoon said King has been an inspiration to many who have fought for all these rights.

"Mel is one who sees what is possible when it's not really probable," he said. "I can hear what Mel's heart is saying. He's just waiting for you to produce something amazing."

With everything King has done, he said his greatest accomplishment is a simple one, persevering.

"[It's] that I am able to sit here right now," he said. "I played tennis this morning, and tomorrow I will play tennis again."

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