

COMMUNITY

Local judge teaches lesson in civil rights at Los Altos Rotary Club

Published on Wednesday, 30 July 2014 01:06
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Courtesy of Randy Gard

Len Edwards addresses Los Altos Rotarians July 17.

Retired Superior Court Judge Len Edwards taught a living history lesson to the Rotary Club of Los Altos July 17 as he described his personal experiences as an early participant in the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi.

During the summer of 1964, Edwards traveled to the South to fight for blacks' right to register to vote. He has seen dramatic changes since then.

As a child, Edwards did not understand segregation and wondered what he could do to make a difference. At 14, he decided to picket the Woolworth's in Mountain View. He told the store owner that Woolworth's stores in the South were discriminating against blacks, and that he should ask his superiors to change the policy. While not successful, Edwards' act of protest was a precursor to his activism.

Edwards later wrote his senior thesis on the topic of what black churches across the country should do to help their brethren in the South. At one point, he had lunch with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

While in law school, he decided to join the 1964 movement to help register blacks to vote in Mississippi. He trained for a week in Oxford, Ohio, before heading south. His group received warnings from famed voting-rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer that the highway patrol would be waiting, and that no one in the group should feel pressured to go, because it would be dangerous. A dozen volunteers had already gone missing, murdered by Mississippi residents who did not want their way of life challenged by outsiders.

Despite the warnings, Edwards traveled to Mississippi that summer and lived with a courageous black family willing to take the risk to help the freedom fighters and volunteers. Edwards' jobs included driving volunteers to register to vote and using his law-school training to secure people's release from jail. The Mississippi Highway Patrol followed him and arrested him five or six times.

Upon attending the recent 50th anniversary in Mississippi recognizing the dramatic events of the summer of 1964, Edwards noticed changes in the South in terms of residents' desire to honor those who had fought for blacks' voting and civil rights that summer. He noted that Mississippi now has more black elected officials than any other state.

Edwards recognized and thanked all the participants of the summer of 1964 for taking risks to support the most impactful civil rights crusade in the country's history.

Edwards, a Los Altos Hills resident, served as a Superior Court judge in Santa Clara County for 26 years and then for six years as Judge-in-Residence at the Center for Families, Children & the Courts, a division of the California Administrative Office of the Courts. As a judge, he worked in the juvenile courts for more than 20 years. As Judge-in-Residence, he served state courts as a consultant specializing in juvenile and family law, domestic violence, drug issues, mediation, judicial ethics, and other issues relating to children and families.

Barbara Small is a member of the Rotary Club of Los Altos. For more information, visit losaltosrotary.org.

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