ly Jewish neighborhood between Lake Washington and the Central Business District. Barber shops, doctor’s offices and restaurants owned by African Americans were now neighborhood fixtures.

Many people of color lived in the neighborhood’s low-rise apartments, bungalows or aging wood-framed walkups. The houses were either “plain and bulky” or “plain and shack-like,” as one resident put it. And there were pockets of neglect. But restrictive covenants banned minorities from many other Seattle neighborhoods. McKinney and his wife Louise spent six months house hunting, often encountering realtors who’d brazenly ask their color of skin over the phone.

Even at the grocery store in 1958 Seattle, McKinney found a tense racial climate, the occasional surge of uneasiness among white patrons. He’d stand in line with his cart and notice the white shopper ahead of him wheeling away. “No, no, I can wait,” a patron told him on more than one occasion. “They were afraid somebody might come” in and stage a hold-up, McKinney says. “They didn’t want to be in the line of the shooting.”
Many black Seattleites were unemployed or working dead-end or low-paying jobs. They sent their children—some 9,000 in the 1960s—to nearly all-black schools. In an era of de facto segregation, 80 percent of African American students attended a small cluster of schools, usually in or near the Central Area.

“Every part of this country has been affected by racism,” McKinney says. “A lot of folks have had social amnesia since it was better than the place they came from. People thought when they got here they were in the Promised Land. I don’t know what had been promised to them. The problem has been here all the time. It’s the same here as anywhere else. The difference is a matter of degree.”

Like his father, the pastor used the power of the pulpit to push for change. “The church provides the crowds. It is part of a system that has a long history of operation. History will tell you that every slave insurrection movement was led by a Negro preacher. Championing the cause of civil rights has always been part of the function of a Negro minister.”

McKinney devoted his time to organizations on the frontlines of the civil rights battlefield: the Friends Against Racial Discrimination, the Congress of Racial Equality, the Central Area Civil Rights Committee and the Greater Council of Churches. His seminal achievement, however, came about in 1961.

The $3,000 check was sent a year earlier, “unsought, unre-
quested and unsolicited” from McKinney and other clergymen. But it prompted a telling question from McKinney’s former Morehouse classmate: “What do you want?” asked Martin Luther King, Jr., now a national figure.

The Brotherhood of Mount Zion Baptist Church had invited the civil rights leader to give a series of speeches in Seattle. King, 32, was controversial. He’d received threatening phone calls. His home in Montgomery had been bombed. He’d survived a stabbing attempt during a book signing in Harlem. But McKinney believed the country’s leading voice for civil rights would send the right message to Seattle at the right time. “A lot of people had never seen him and wanted to hear him. We wanted him to come in and address us here. And he agreed.”

The forthcoming King visit to Seattle sparked controversy. Conservative blacks worried his visit would trigger racial disputes. Some of McKinney’s parishioners found anti-King material on their desks at Boeing. One parent of a student at Garfield High School, where King was scheduled to speak, raised concerns about the leader’s rumored ties to the Communist Party.

McKinney wrote King, alerting him of circumstances surrounding his scheduled tour. “An extreme conservative right-wing element, whose presence is a known factor on the west coast, have been quite vocal about your coming. The total community, which far exceeds the Negro population of 27,000, is quite aroused over some incidents that have occurred relative to your visit here. We have worked exceedingly hard to gain city-wide support for your first visit to the Pacific Northwest, and that support is guaranteed now more than ever.”

While King’s entire visit was controversial, one stop proved especially contentious. In 1961, Seattle was inundated with massive construction projects for the Century 21 Exposition. The 1962 World’s Fair limited the number of available venues that could accommodate large crowds. McKinney settled on Seattle First Presbyterian Church at 8th and Madison, a great barnlike building that could hold some 3,000 people. He counted on a gentleman’s agreement and began publicizing the speech. “We got closer to it and started announcing it,” McKinney says. “There was some kickback at the church.”
First Presbyterian canceled the speech, triggering an unforgettable encounter between McKinney and the church lay leader who was also a lawyer. The imposing attorney, with his 6-2 frame and white flowing mane, had a “voice that could strike fear in judge and jury.”

McKinney can still hear his booming voice: “You did not follow proper procedures. But I know you’ve spent money. Give us a bill and we’ll pay for it.”

“We didn’t come down here asking for any money,” McKinney told him. “We don’t want your money.”

“What did you say?”

“You heard me. Nobody told us that there were any hoops to jump through, papers to sign and documents. You never told us that. But that’s okay, Dr. King will be in town, he will speak. And I think I ought to let you know—this is not a threat—but we are going to tell the world about what happened.”

“Well, tell the truth,” the attorney responded.

“Nothing but the truth, so help me God!”

“Right is right,” McKinney says. “We had an agreement and we were upholding our end of the bargain. Now you want to bag down because some folks are bigoted and racist and don’t want to have Dr. King speak here.”

“You’ll look back and thank them,” King said when he heard the news. “Some people can kick you upstairs when they’re trying to put you downstairs.”
The cancellation generated headlines. King’s November visit would mark his only visit to Seattle and the last time he would travel alone. He reported bomb threats on the airplanes he flew and suspicious-looking men who seemed to be tailing him in Chicago and Birmingham.

When he arrived that November, the prominent figure’s message of nonviolence, his plea to President Kennedy to outlaw segregation by executive order, his admonition that young people were imperative to the movement, were met with roaring applause all over Seattle. To some 2,000 University of Washington students packed into Meany Hall, King said, “The student movements have done more to save the soul of the nation than anything I can think of. ... We’ve broken loose from the Egypt of slavery and stand on the border of the promised land of integration.”

“His was a voice that needed to be heard,” McKinney says. “We were going through some difficult times. You had the feeling that you knew you were doing the right thing and somebody had to stand up for it.”

King gave two assemblies at Garfield High School and revved up a packed house at Eagles Auditorium with such force one onlooker said “the hall was shaking—literally.”

King and McKinney later pulled up chairs at Mitchell’s Bar-be-cue where they talked for hours. “Dr. King loved barbecue. He didn’t want to go to anybody’s home, but if I could take him to that place where I showed him good barbecue he’d love it. We were there until four o’clock in the morning. People were walking in off the street and I think he ordered everything on the menu.”

Thirty-seven years later, as McKinney prepared to retire, he spotted an envelope from Seattle First Presbyterian Church in a stack of mail. At first, he tossed the unopened envelope in the file, but something told him to read the letter. “Thirty seven or thirty eight years ago,” it stated, “a grave injustice was done to your church and to you, and we wish to apologize for that.”

McKinney immediately called the church minister, who
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The King Center
joked, “I think I’m a little younger than you. I’ll come up there.”

When the minster reached 19th and Madison, McKinney told him, “You know, a lot of whites say that this is unnecessary. Their ancestors never owned slaves, so we don’t owe you an apology for anything. That’s what some have said. And not even apologize for white privilege, those feelings that certain things are automatically yours because of who you are.”

McKinney and his wife Louise invited the minister to his retirement banquet where he was introduced and thanked.

The Civil Rights Movement exploded in 1963 with the assassination of Medgar Evers by a Klan member and King’s “I-have-a-dream” address before throngs of supporters, a quarter-million in all, on the National Mall. In Seattle, McKinney stood before 75 key pastors, priests and rabbis in the basement of his Seattle church. He asked them to commit, then and there, to the cause of liberty and justice for all—a self-evident truth, as the Founders put it.

The 1960s had ushered in a wave of protests, rallies and boycotts on the streets of Seattle. McKinney worked for the cause day and night. He remembers an elderly woman who’d find a two-dollar bill and hand it to him without explanation. “I’m counting on you,” her face seemed to say. McKinney would shoot pool with a neighbor to clear his head on rare occasions. But more typically, he left in the morning before his girls arose and returned after they fell into sleep.

“I called him my on-again-off-again-gone-

Inspired by the assassination of Medgar Evers, black clergymen lead hundreds of demonstrators—black and white alike—on a march for civil rights from Mount Zion Baptist Church to Westlake Mall. McKinney, a key organizer, is somewhere in the crowd. Seattle Municipal Archives
again Daddy because I didn’t see him, even when he was in town,” says Lora-Ellen. “We only played one time. I remember we spent a part of the afternoon downstairs in the laundry room making a kite and we took it to the park across the street. It got up in the air and it rained. That was the end of that. I knew that he was working on things that were important, that helped people that were significant for the world. And so it was a sacrifice in our family to make, that we wouldn’t see him.”

McKinney led boycotts against large companies like Safeway, distributing fliers that read “Don’t shop where you can’t work!” and negotiating deals with company management. He organized protests against department stores that included The Bon Marche and Frederick & Nelson. “The big march on Frederick & Nelson really opened up a lot of doors,” McKinney recalls. “I remember one fellow, he was a member of our congregation, and he was highly critical of me and my participation, and told us we shouldn’t march against Frederick & Nelson. But when we did and were successful, he was one of the first persons who applied for a job.”

Later, in 1966, the Baptist minister co-founded the Seattle Opportunity Industrialization Center in the basement of his church. The training center equipped minorities who were unemployed or underemployed with the life and job skills necessary to compete in the workforce. The Seattle program replicated the national OIC founded in an abandoned jailhouse in 1964. McKinney became a prominent figure in the national organization and served as its national vice president. By 1970, nearly a thousand students found work through the Seattle OIC. It was just the beginning. “We were able to, for 20 years, train people, and build a facility at 22nd and Jackson,” McKinney says.

The pastor also waged protests against the city of Seattle and then-Mayor Gordon Clinton for the administration’s sluggish pace on open housing. “We’re going to get there with or without your help,” McKinney threatened during one rally. A realtor countered, “It is disheartening for us to see clergymen jumping on the bandwagon for forced housing. If the clergymen failed to achieve a change of hearts in their own congre-
McKinney and other ministers led one march at City Hall in July 1963 that resulted in a daylong sit-in at the mayor’s office and the creation of a proposed Human Rights Commission. McKinney, one of a dozen original members and two blacks to serve on the commission, would see Seattle finally adopt open housing after the assassination of Dr. King in 1968 and the passage of the federal Fair Housing Act. Years later, the commission co-chair recognized the pastor’s work: “The Seattle Human Rights Commission owes a debt of gratitude to the Rev. Dr. McKinney for forging the path of the Commission for justice and human dignity.”

McKinney and Mount Zion Baptist Church were on the front lines of a two-day boycott of Seattle Schools in the spring of 1966. Fed up with lower test scores, inadequate classroom funding and years of failed attempts at desegregating the district, organizers directed thousands of students to boycott public schools and attend Freedom Schools set up in the Central Area. The 1966 boycott, which drew hundreds to McKinney’s church, forced the Seattle School Board to adopt many programs requested by its leaders. Mandatory busing finally came along in 1978.

All told, the fight for justice left its emotional scars on the McKinney family who endured constant scrutiny and a barrage of threats. Dissidents lashed out. In particular, McKinney
remembers the racial slurs of one late-night caller: “Do you preach nigger’s funerals?” he’d taunt before hanging up.

“Do you preach niggers' funerals?” came the same slur on another night.

The minister responded and hung up.

The man promptly called back. “What did you say?”

“Did your mama die?” McKinney repeated.

McKinney never heard from that caller again. “Most of those people are cowards,” he says. “We had our share of threats. They went with the territory. That’s the price you had to pay. We had rocks and fecal matter thrown at the house. Some people were fearful for their kids to be our babysitters. They didn’t want anything to happen to their kids. That’s part of the price. My wife and I talked about it often. I’m glad she was not like some wives who say, ‘I can’t put up with this. I’m out of here.’ She wasn’t that way, she was very supportive.”

Both McKinney girls were hassled on the playground, pulled from school after enduring verbal or physical attacks. The threats that alarmed them most came from the Seattle chapter of the Black Panthers. Rhoda McKinney-Jones says her father’s non-violent approach to the struggle made him a target: “There was a place for the Black Panthers, but in Seattle they made our lives miserable. They would march in front of our house with rifles. I was a kid who just wanted to go outside and make mud pies.”
Lora-Ellen says she was once called to the headmaster’s office at St. Nicholas School and shocked to discover a leader of the Black Panthers holding a rifle, quoting Karl Marx and “railing about the fact that this school was illegitimate and an elite establishment. I was there all day.”

When McKinney saw his daughter, agitated and perspiring, she recounted the ordeal. “What I didn’t find out until maybe 2010 is that my father went up to [the Black Panthers’] office with a gun and told them that he would kill them if they ever bothered me again.”

“Processing as a child was a struggle,” acknowledges Rhoda. “Years of working things out. We all have our battle scars and wear them differently.”

“I did not go out looking for stuff, just like Dr. King did not,” McKinney says. “There are certain calls in your life that you cannot reject or ignore. There’s a price to pay, but you go on and pay it. You can ask the Lord to give you the strength to make it, and he did. You can see enemies become footstools. You had no guarantee that that’s going to happen, but that’s when your faith kicks in.”

As best they could, McKinney and his wife Louise tried to bring normalcy to the girls’ lives. McKinney called regularly from the road. Louise helped them both understand what they viewed as the great purpose of their father’s life. On the first Sunday in October 1955, Dr. King informed McKinney and several dinner guests that he had accepted his fate—he was on a collision course with destiny and would be assassinated: “In any trip, there’s a point of no return,” the civil rights leader

McKinney’s youngest daughter, Rhoda Eileen. McKinney family collection
said. “You go too far. You can’t turn around and go back, unsquare an egg. If you know you’re right, you have cosmic companionship. You’re not alone.”

There was no martyr complex, no looking for death, McKinney says. “But time and history have a way of catching up with you.” By 1968, the death threats again King numbered 50.

On the last day of King’s life, as he stood on a hotel balcony in Memphis, McKinney was on a flight from Philadelphia to Seattle. A front-page photo of King in Memphis caught the preacher’s eye during a stop in Kansas City. “It showed young gangs breaking up the peaceful marches,” he remembers. “And there was a look on his face that troubled me.”

McKinney bought the newspaper and stared at the photograph until he reached Seattle. He remembers an eerie stillness at SeaTac and the greeting from the chairman of the Deacons. “We have to get to the television station,” he told McKinney. “Dr. King was killed.”

The death of Dr. King brought a whirlwind of interviews
for McKinney, who called his friend “an apostle of love.” Days later, 10,000 marched Seattle streets in King’s honor.

In more than 115 years, no one has continuously preached longer at Mount Zion Baptist Church than the Rev. Dr. Samuel McKinney. His achievements—too numerous to list in entirety—include the creation of a federal credit union, an accredited pre-school and kindergarten, an $850,000 African sanctuary and a 64-unit retirement manor. McKinney has mentored more than 40 ministers, lectured at colleges and seminaries around the nation and preached around the globe.

McKinney sees himself as a leader who simply came along at the right time. “I rose to whatever occasion was necessary. You don’t jump out and say, ‘Hey, I’m your leader. Follow me.’ You’re called to a church.”

“There are many, many people in the world who do good and contribute meaningfully to their communities,” says Loraelen. “But not everyone is at the cusp of history. There is some divinity, some happenstance and some luck, but sometimes people are forced into history—their child goes missing and they have to start a movement. That’s what happened with my father.”

“Daddy changed lives, impacted people and loved us all immensely,” Rhoda says. “He stood for something and created pathways I could follow, show my son and share with others. Were there dark moments? Absolutely. Were there days I wished we did not have to share our parents with people, parishioners and those protesting for a better way? Yes. But I also understood the nature and the necessity of the greater good.”

McKinney is proud to call Seattle home. “We’ve come a long way, but we still have a long way to go,” the preacher says. “Some say we want a colorblind society. We don’t need a colorblind society. In fact, if you’re colorblind, you shouldn’t drive a car. You can’t tell a red light from a green light. But God made us all in different shades and colors and we are all God’s children. And we ought to treat everybody the way we want to be treated.”
In the seaport far from everywhere, now a city recognized on the world stage, a stretch of 19th Avenue is named in honor of the Rev. Dr. Samuel Berry McKinney, now an iconic figure. The “conscience of our city” one admirer said. On his walk with God, now 89 years and counting, you’ll still find him fighting for the Social Gospel he was raised to preach. As he pointed out to one crowd, “We’re not in Heaven yet.”

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