

National Guard: Keynote speaker highlights journey through segregation at Juneteenth Day event

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MILWAUKEE — A standing-room-only crowd at Sijan Hall on the Wisconsin Air National Guard's 128th Air Refueling Base heard from civil rights activist, author and Air Force veteran James Meredith at a June 20 event observing Juneteenth Day.

Because Juneteenth Day is a federal holiday, the Air National Guard base was not open June 19.

"I would not be here today if not for James Meredith," said his cousin Carl Meredith, a colonel in the Wisconsin Army National Guard. Col Meredith was selected as a diversity and inclusion co-champion to teach, coach and mentor the Wisconsin Department of Military Affairs' new State Joint Diversity Executive Council.

"When I think about what he endured, and what he battled, I am humbled to think I am standing on his shoulders and legacy," Col. Meredith continued. "All of us are in debt to the resilience and perseverance of this incredible man in our nation's history."

The event — titled "Who is James Meredith?" — was hosted by the Wisconsin National Guard's Equal Opportunity Office as well as the Department of Military Affairs' Diversity and Inclusion Program.

"We wanted this special event to raise awareness of the importance of diversity and inclusion in the National Guard by having an open conversation about the history of Emancipation Day, the struggle for desegregation and the continuing fight for civil rights in our country," said Katie Bermudez, diversity and inclusion program

manager.

Meredith did not just break racial barriers, he shattered them. After serving for nine years as one of the first black recruits for the Air Force in 1951, he applied for admission to the University of Mississippi in 1961. The process went well at first, until he had to submit a photograph of himself. Meredith wrote an impassioned letter to the U.S. Department of Justice in 1961, asking “that the federal agencies use the power and prestige of their positions to [ensure] the full rights of citizenship for our people.

“I do hope to see the day when the million Negroes that live in the state of Mississippi will have cause not to fear as they fear today,” he wrote.

President John F. Kennedy would send federal troops and the National Guard to ensure order when Meredith became the first African American admitted to the University of Mississippi in 1962.

“For me, the American dream has always been the ultimate accomplishment of the quality of mankind,” Meredith said during the event. “While stationed with the Air Force in Japan, I learned that racism is a man-made construct — it’s not natural. The people of Japan treated me and others of color with respect and dignity. I figured, if we learn racism, we can also learn how to embrace people of color.

“This was a valuable lesson in my life.”

The Juneteenth Day observation also featured a short excerpt from a documentary about James Meredith, produced by his wife Dr. Judy Alsobrooks Meredith, and a panel discussion with Wisconsin National Guard leadership.

Meredith shows no signs of slowing down on the verge of his 90th birthday. His newest mission is to help draw attention to battling crime in black communities around the country. He has visited and spent time with leaders in nearly 90 communities around the nation, seeking solutions to help improve the lives of disenfranchised and disengaged people in urban communities.

Bermudez embraced that work ethic.

“The communities we serve embrace cultural diversity and inclusive behaviors,” she said. “As a result, we must learn, grow and develop the cultural intelligence of our members to be able to meet the needs of our stakeholders, constituents and

communities where they are at. [Diversity and Inclusion] is not just what we do, it is who we are!”