Black History Month: Revisiting the 1968 Washington, D.C. Riots

In the continued celebration of Black History Month, Banner Witcoff seeks to share unique stories, perspectives, and experiences with our community. Today we share a story from Benjamin Hogan, who works in our Washington, D.C. office.

On April 4, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. What followed was rioting and protests across the county. Washington, D.C. experienced four-days of rioting and was among the cities with the greatest number of participants, leaving nearly one-thousand buildings burned, 13 people killed, and thousands arrested.

Banner Witcoff's Benjamin Hogan, shares his experience living on 14th & W Streets NW in Washington, D.C., at the time of the riots. He explores how Martin Luther King Jr. and his assassination influenced how he sees and celebrates Black History Month as an adult.

Living at 14th & W Streets NW in Washington, D.C. at the time, what was your experience during the 1968 riots that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.?

I was only five years old at the time, so I didn't really have a good understanding of what was going on. During the riots in my neighborhood, I remember my dad telling us to duck down; the National Guard was on our roof, and tear gas was being thrown into the streets. I let my curiosity get the best of me and poked my head up so I could see out the window and remember seeing a building on fire.

Once it was all over, we all went outside and it was like a bomb had gone off. Toys and clothes littered the streets and all you could smell was the burnt buildings.

We eventually moved out of the area, but it took nearly 20 years for the metro to come in and rebuild the neighborhood. Buildings stayed damaged, burned and abandoned for a long, long time.

How did this experience impact the way you see, and celebrate, Black History Month as an adult?

Black History Month, for me, serves as a reminder of the changes we have made, I see a lot of changes in things. We've seen big progress approved by the majority; our first Black President, for example.

When I think about Martin Luther King Jr. and his plan, his dreams, I think of the progress we have made, and not just for the Black community. I teach my kids that if you want to grow, you have to go with the flow. No one said change and progress was going to be easy, and I believe we have to go through the tough parts to get to the good ones. I'm reminded that we can all come together and it will make us strong.

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