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*toward building a new society on the vacant lots of the old . . .*

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## **The Poor People's Campaign Celebrates 40 Years at Morgan State University - By Ron Kipling Williams**

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### **A poor people's campaign will happen again...**

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On Thursday, December 4th, Morgan State University's Murphy Fine Arts Center was the site of another of the several historic anniversaries this year. The Poor People's campaign, which took place in 1968 in Washington, DC, was commemorated as part of The Bill of Rights / TransAfrica Day Convocation, honoring former congressman and NAACP president Kweisi Mfume.

Gilliam Concert Hall was filled with teachers, former civil rights activists, elected officials, and students. Photographer Robert Houston, who was recognized during the program, spent three weeks at the 1968 Poor People's March in the shantytown known as Resurrection City while on assignment for Life Magazine. His exhibit was briefly displayed at the James E. Lewis Museum of Art.

### *History of The Poor People's Campaign*

America was embroiled in the turbulent battle for civil rights in the late 1960s on the heels of the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1965, which ended legal segregation. However, conditions were far from equal. It was not just blacks who were facing unequal treatment across the board, but many other groups. Nationwide poverty had always been a backburner issue, particularly because of the prominence of the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements.

Already publicly opposing the Vietnam War and pointing out contradictions to racial and economic disparities at home, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was searching for ways in which to make poverty a national outcry. Then one day in 1967, Marian Wright (now Edelman) told the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) president to create a poor people's campaign to make such a stance. Dr. King held a press conference on December 4th, 1967, in Atlanta to announce the campaign, slated to begin in April of 1968. "Some historians say it was Dr. King's final and most ambitious mission," said Mfume.

While advocating for the black sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee,

Dr. King gave his prophetic “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech on April 3rd, 1968. The next day he was slain on his balcony at the Lorraine Hotel.

Suddenly, the campaign loomed with more significance. In May of 1968, thousands of demonstrators from all walks of life, from celebrity entertainers to children, filled Washington, DC’s National Mall. Rev. Ralph Abernathy, who became SCLC president, took over the organization of the campaign, flanked by members like Hosea Williams and Stokely Carmichael.

Protesters ate, slept, and played together. There were barbers and other services on site, along with theater performances and concerts. Many celebrities joined Resurrection City, including Dizzy Gillespie, Sidney Portier, Joan Baez, Harry Belafonte, and Lou Rawls.

### *Last Month's Conference*

Radio talk show host and Center for Emerging Media president and executive producer Marc Steiner, who spoke at the convocation, was 22 years old living in Resurrection City. He recounted how people came by mule trains, cars, buses, trains, and even by foot from rural counties, urban centers, Native American reservations, and other parts of the country.

“We were your age,” said Steiner, addressing the Morgan students in the audience. “There were people from eight to 80. It was an amazing moment.”

What is the state of the economy 40 years from now? “We have a long, long way to go,” said Mfume. “It is undeniable far too many live in poverty. The disparities have grown.”

Forty-three years after desegregation, the political landscape for blacks has changed. “Many blacks have become republicanized,” said Mfume, referring to their, “Uncle Clarence Thomas, pull yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality.

Still, the devastation from poverty continues, exacerbated by the deepening recession, corporate bailouts, and a lending crisis precipitated by the same institutions that are being bailed out by the government.

“A poor people’s campaign will happen again,” said Steiner.

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