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Panel talks changes in civil rights

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Forty years ago, the Rev. Nathaniel Irvin said, he had a murky view of what hope could become.

Today's youth can live out the hope that seemed distant and uncertain during the civil rights era, he said.

"These young people can see what we had only hoped for," he said. "It's no longer about north, south, east or west. It's not about lightly pigmented or heavily pigmented."

About 40 people gathered at the Lucy Craft Laney Museum of Black History's monthly senior luncheon Wednesday to discuss the theme "40 Years of Social and Political Change: 1968-2008." The panel of speakers consisted of people who lived during the 1960s and Richmond County high school students who witnessed the election of Barack Obama.

The Rev. Irvin, the pastor of Old Storm Branch Baptist Church, and political activist Mallory Millender shared their experiences during the height of the civil rights movement. Students from A.R. Johnson Health Science and Engineering Magnet and Lucy C. Laney high schools talked about their election-night experience in a busy CNN newsroom in New York City.

All the students agreed that the day would likely go down in history, just as the march on Washington and other events of the 1960s did.

Laney senior Derrick Douglas said the CNN visit was the opportunity of a lifetime.

"I was able to experience history firsthand," he said. "I now know instead of just dreaming about becoming president, it can happen."

Dr. Millender, however, cautioned those in attendance about what the election would mean.

"There was a great backlash in the progression of the '60s. I believe that's what will happen now," he said. "It's an absolute mistake to think that because Obama was selected as our president that we're in a post-racial America."

The Rev. Irvin said Mr. Obama's election proves times have changed.

"I see a new day, a new dawn," he said. "I believe we're tired of the foolishness. He wouldn't have been elected if that wasn't true."

Mr. Douglas said that, just as in the 1960s, the country has much to improve on, but he plans to be a part of that change.

"I think it's amazing that Dr. Millender stood up for what he thought was right," he said. "I think my generation can keep that going by trying to have the same influence he did."

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