



The battle for civil rights is an ongoing process, entertainer and activist Harry Belafonte told a UD audience on Thursday.

## 'Step into this space'

### Harry Belafonte tells students to step up for humanity now

4:29 p.m., Feb. 28, 2014--Two days shy of his 87th birthday, Harry Belafonte received a rousing welcome from a standing-room-only audience who came to hear the singer, actor and civil rights activist share his experiences and vision during a Black History Month talk Thursday evening, Feb. 27, in the University of Delaware's Trabant University Center.

"Civil rights is not something that has fits and starts," Belafonte said. "It's an ongoing process. We need to look at what people did in those days, and see what we need to do today."

Belafonte said he was saddened to see that America has abandoned its own history in regards to civil rights and race relations.

"Why have we not taken to the streets, where is the radical voice of America?" Belafonte asked. "We need to think outside of the normal. If we are living inside the box and it is not working, we need to go outside the box. We need to think radically."

Recognizing Black History Month and the large number of students in the audience, Belafonte recalled the students of a half-century ago who risked their lives by journeying to Greenwood, Miss., to lend a hand in registering black voters.

"Fifty years ago I got a call from Mississippi," Belafonte said. "Young people had come down South to engage in a voter registration campaign. They were helping to instruct the black people about voting and give them a sense of their rights."

Belafonte recalled that the students, most of whom were white, did a great job, but the fury of the opposition was fierce and people supporting action in Greenwood feared that the students would be leaving at the end of the summer to return to their towns and college classes.

"Because of the loss of life that occurred just at the end of the voter registration drive, the fear was that it would look like the forces of evil had overcome the community," Belafonte said. "Many of these students said they would stay on. They had accepted the challenge, but the money in the budget to carry this forward was exhausted."

That's when Belafonte and his friend, actor Sidney Poitier, stepped into the breach to see that the needed funds ended up in the right hands.

"I raised \$70,000, which more than met the emergencies of the moment, but if we didn't get it down there, people would believe that their dreams would have been overcome by the forces of evil," Belafonte said. "I called my closest friend, Sidney Poitier, and asked him what he was doing this weekend."

With a smile, Belafonte said Poitier agreed to go South but only on the condition that if he and Belafonte made it back alive, that Belafonte would never call him for a favor again.

“The plane dropped us off in Greenwood. There were no federal marshals, and it was the blackest night I had ever seen. I was also struck by how quickly the plane took off again.”

After a harrowing car ride, with the opposing forces following behind and shooting rifles up in the air, Poitier and Belafonte got through the “enemy lines, so to speak, the money was distributed and the voter registration campaign continued.”

Belafonte also recalled his first meeting with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, and the last time he saw King before the civil rights leader went to Memphis, where he was murdered on April 4, 1968.

“He came to our home that night and he seemed somewhat distracted. It was so noticeable, that I stopped the meeting and asked him what was the matter,” Belafonte said. “He said, ‘I’ve been preoccupied with the fact that we’ve fought long and hard for integration, and that maybe we’re integrating into a burning house.’”

The group didn’t really know how to take this thought, Belafonte said.

“I asked him what he would have us become,” Belafonte said. “He answered, ‘Firemen.’”

Belafonte said that when he looks at the things that those students and others did 50 years ago, it pains him to see an America where the ruling elites are working to once again deny many people of their constitutional right to vote.

“I’m driven to an eternal sense of hope. Perhaps there is another generation coming like the one that came to Greenwood,” Belafonte said. “We are waiting for you to step into this space.”

### **Special presentation**

The program began with a welcome from Georgina Class-Peters, a sophomore political science major, and an artistic expression by CHAOS Prayze Mime Ministry.

Kassandra Moye, director of the Center for Black Culture, introduced Belafonte as a living legend, activist, humanitarian and entertainer, and noted his many contributions to the struggle for civil rights for all Americans.

“Born on the cusp of the Harlem Renaissance in 1927, the odds were stacked against him. Whether chosen, or by his choice, Mr. Belafonte has defied those odds and represents an extraordinary example of fortitude, perseverance and dignity,” Moye said. “At 86 years young, soon to be 87 this Saturday, Mr. Belafonte’s soul is still intact and he is on the front lines working to make the world a better place and he does it with such grace, humility and the energy of many men much younger.”

Following a question and answer session, Belafonte was presented with a special birthday gift, which included a candle-capped cake. The appreciative audience responded by singing the traditional *Happy Birthday* refrain and giving him a long and loud standing ovation.

Supporting the Center for Black Culture, the Black Student Union and the Cultural Programming Board in presenting the event were the Office of Equity and Inclusion, the Office of Residence Life and Housing, the Office of Student Life and the Black Alumni Organization.

Article by Jerry Rhodes

Photos by Evan Krape