

Center to be dedicated in Till's memory

People Shores investor had sworn he wouldn't set foot in Mississippi

Michael Banks
The Press Register

It was during the grand opening ceremony for the People Shores' center in San Jose, Calif., in May when Jon Levingston first got the idea for a name for the center that would eventually come to Clarksdale.

He had been surprised when Murali Vullaganti, the CEO and founder of People Shores, had asked him to say a few words during the ceremony. It was his first time meeting the top brass of People Shores and there was a crowd of West Coast dignitaries and a virtual who's who of top tech leaders in the crowd.

But this economic development leader of a mid-sized Delta town struggling with job loss and population decline didn't flinch. He just hardened back to the past.

"I started thinking, 'What would move these people,'" Levingston recalled. "I thought where I came from, what our history was and I thought of this quote by Dr. Martin Luther King... 'The arc of history is long, but it bends toward justice.' And then I added, 'But it doesn't get there on its own.'"

He said he wanted to get across the idea that the model espoused by People Shores could be "the opportunity to stop the depopulation" in the Mississippi

Delta and also "give people an educational and economic opportunity that they may not otherwise have."

Near the end of his talk, Levingston turned to Vullaganti and invited him to come visit and start his second center in Clarksdale.

"Everybody applauded and stood up and cheered, actually," Levingston said. "That began the conversation with the whole People Shores team."

His words struck a chord with one attendee in particular. An Indian-American man similar in age to Levingston approached him, took both of his hands in his own and, with tears in his eyes, looked into Levingston's eyes and said, "I was never going to Mississippi before. I had read about Emmitt Till. I had read about what had happened. And I would never go to that state."

"But after hearing you, I want to come to Clarksdale. And I hope we open up a center."

Turns out that man was Shiva Patibanda, who is a major investor in People Shores. Patibanda had actually obtained a master's degree in computer science from Louisiana State University in the early 1980s, but his attitude about the South changed after he watched a documentary in 1985 about Till.



MICHAEL BANKS / THE CLARKSDALE PRESS REGISTER

Shiva Patibanda, an investor with People Shores, said he was greatly impacted by viewing a documentary about the murder of Emmitt Till in 1955 in Mississippi.

"That documentary shook the insides of me and completely destroyed something very fundamental in me. After I saw that, I couldn't sleep at night. I promised myself I would never come to Mississippi ever again in my life," Patibanda said during Tuesday's People Shores announcement at Coahoma Community College.

Till was a young African-American who was murdered in nearby Sumner County in 1955 at the age of 14, after being accused of

offending a white woman in her family's grocery store. Later that same year, an all-white jury in Sumner would acquit the two white men charged with Till's murder.

Patibanda said he turned down a number of job opportunities in the South.

"That was the coward in me. The coward in me was so shaken and scared by what happened. And I stuck to my cowardice and I never came to the South again," he said.

But after hearing Levingston's speech, in which

he said, "We, in the Mississippi Delta, are paying for the crimes of our ancestors," Patibanda realized his stance against the South was wrong and that a lot of has changed since Till's death in 1955.

That conversation with Patibanda, particularly his words about Till, stuck with Levingston, who grew up in Cleveland and who has always had an interest in civil rights.

Now, some 70 years later and 20-something miles

from where the murder and trial took place, Levingston said this area has an opportunity to "create financial sustainability and break the cycle of poverty."

He said thoughts of Till and People Shores and Clarksdale kept fumbling around in his brain until he came up with the idea of having the Clarksdale location dedicated to the memory of Emmitt Till.

The idea was embraced by Patibanda and other People Shores leaders and plans are to have it included on the signage at the new Clarksdale center.

Levingston said the dedication sends the message of "that pain is our pain. We are all in this together."

"We are all one community and we need to speak as one community. And we need to know our history and own our history to ensure that we move forward to a better time for every one of us."

Patibanda agreed.

"In your community right here, in Mississippi, there are a lot of greats. All we need to do is a little extra in the community and we will see extraordinary things happen here, right here in Mississippi."

It was a lesson he learned while listening to Levingston's words.

"Instead of sitting there and being a coward like I was, I could come here and spread love and affection," Patibanda said. "I'm hoping that over the next several years we will heal and become one strong community."



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