

BBC Radio 5 Live

Nick Bryant in Washington British Broadcasting Corporation

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Thousands of protesters are gathering in Memphis, Tennessee where they will be marching to the spot where Martin Luther King was gunned down thirty years ago. Since his death, black people have made great advances in all aspects of American life, but "has that dream been fulfilled?" Radio 5 Live's Nick Bryant has been to Washington, the venue for Dr. King's most famous speech.

Nick Bryant: It was here on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington that Martin Luther King delivered his most famous speech. He was addressing more than 250,000 people. He felt that the words he prepared were somehow failing to inspire his audience. So he returned to a theme which he had spoken of before, his dream of a society in which his four young children would grow up to be judged not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. For many black Americans, however, the dream has been deferred.

Nick Bryant: We now are in the Paradise neighborhood of northeast Washington, D.C. This was one of the most notorious sections of Washington, D.C., during the time that the city was known as the Murder Capital of the World. This particular neighborhood had a murder a day. Former policeman Eddie Banks has spent much of the last thirty years patrolling the capital beat, and used to regard these as some of the meanest streets. In fact, up until two years ago, we would had have to wear bullet proof vests just to make this journey.

Eddie Banks: Well if you wanted to really be safe you would. One thing for sure, the drug dealers and the other bad guys, they wore bullet proof vests. It was simply not a safe area to be in.

Nick Bryant: Now the screams are from children playing. Up until recently there were echoes from the drug guns nearby, says community worker Ron Brown.

Ron Brown: The problems facing children growing up in Paradise were unbearable. Crime, drugs, filth, trash, murder -- just outright deplorable conditions.

Nick Bryant: What future would these kids have had a few years ago?

Ron Brown: None at all, none whatsoever.

Nick Bryant: But now the neighborhood is being transformed, lastly as a result of the opening of a Community Center. It's become the focus for educational programs, mentoring schemes linking the police with local children and, most importantly of all, a drug awareness program. Dorian Simpson runs it.

Dorian Simpson: We haven't conquered this, the drug abuse or the drug situation totally, but we are addressing it on an ongoing basis.

Nick Bryant: The Paradise program is supported by The Eisenhower Foundation, an organization set up to chart the progress of minority groups in the states. Its most recent findings are alarming -- that the dire warnings from a presidential commission thirty years ago have been realized. That America has moved toward two societies -- one white, one black. Lynn Curtis is President of the Eisenhower Foundation.

Lynn Curtis: In the last thirty years there has been some good news in terms of race and income in America. For example, there is a growing African American middle class. On the other hand, we found a lot of negatives. For example, while we have a full employment economy nationally, we have employment at depression levels in the inner city. The racial gap and the income and class gaps in America are expanding.

Nick Bryant: Perhaps the most alarming statistic of all is that in the late sixties the median income of black families was 58 percent of white families. Thirty years on, the figure is much the same. It's unsurprising perhaps that so many black Americans continue to seek comfort in their faith, and it's no different for the members of this choir at Martin Luther King's home church in Atlanta. Even if their lives are being visited by injustice, their hope is of a better future to come, and, King, says Choir Leader Lambuster Jackson, is still their spiritual leader.

Lambuster Jackson: I believe he fought for all of us, to love one another and live together in peace.

Nick Bryant: And that dream still lives.

Lambuster Jackson: Yes! Yes!

Nick Bryant: This is Nick Bryant in Washington.