

Activism in the Academy

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Special to the AmNews

At 6:30 on the April morning of Dr. King's funeral, a young Manning Marable found he was the first mourner to arrive at the doors of Ebenezer Baptist Church.

The previous day, at his mom's insistence, the 17-year-old had taken his first plane trip, traveling from Dayton to Atlanta, to cover King's funeral for the "Youth Speaks Out" column he penned for the Dayton Black Express.

Sitting on Ebenezer's steps, on the day that the Columbia University scholar describes as "life-altering," Marable watched the crowd of mourners swell.

When Ralph David Abernathy—King's closest confidante—announced that not everyone would be admitted into Ebenezer and most would have to watch the televised service from screens outside the sanctuary, Marable continued to wait.

Even when certain belligerent members of the crowd pushed to get to the church's front door, they had a tough time getting past Marable.

"This man began pushing me in the back," Marable recalled. "I turned around—and it was Richard Nixon." Though the soon-to-be president eventually found his way into the sanctu-

ary through a side door, he never did get past Marable that day.

It's Dr. Marable's ability to not only to be the intellectual—professor of history, political science, and public affairs; founder

Black New Yorkers

and director of numerous Black studies programs around the nation; and author of nearly two dozen books—but also the activist, who urges reparations, crafts equal opportunity programs at the university level, and teaches inmates at Sing Sing, which makes him a different kind of scholar.

"Within the Black intellectual tradition there's always been a recognition since W.E.B. DuBois that knowledge is only meaningful if it helps to transform the material circumstances of Black people's daily lives," said Marable, also a great admirer of his wife, City College anthropologist professor Leith Mullings, for her community-grounded research and activism.

In the 12 years since his advent at Columbia, where until 2003 he served as founding director of the Institute for Research of African-American Studies and founded the Center

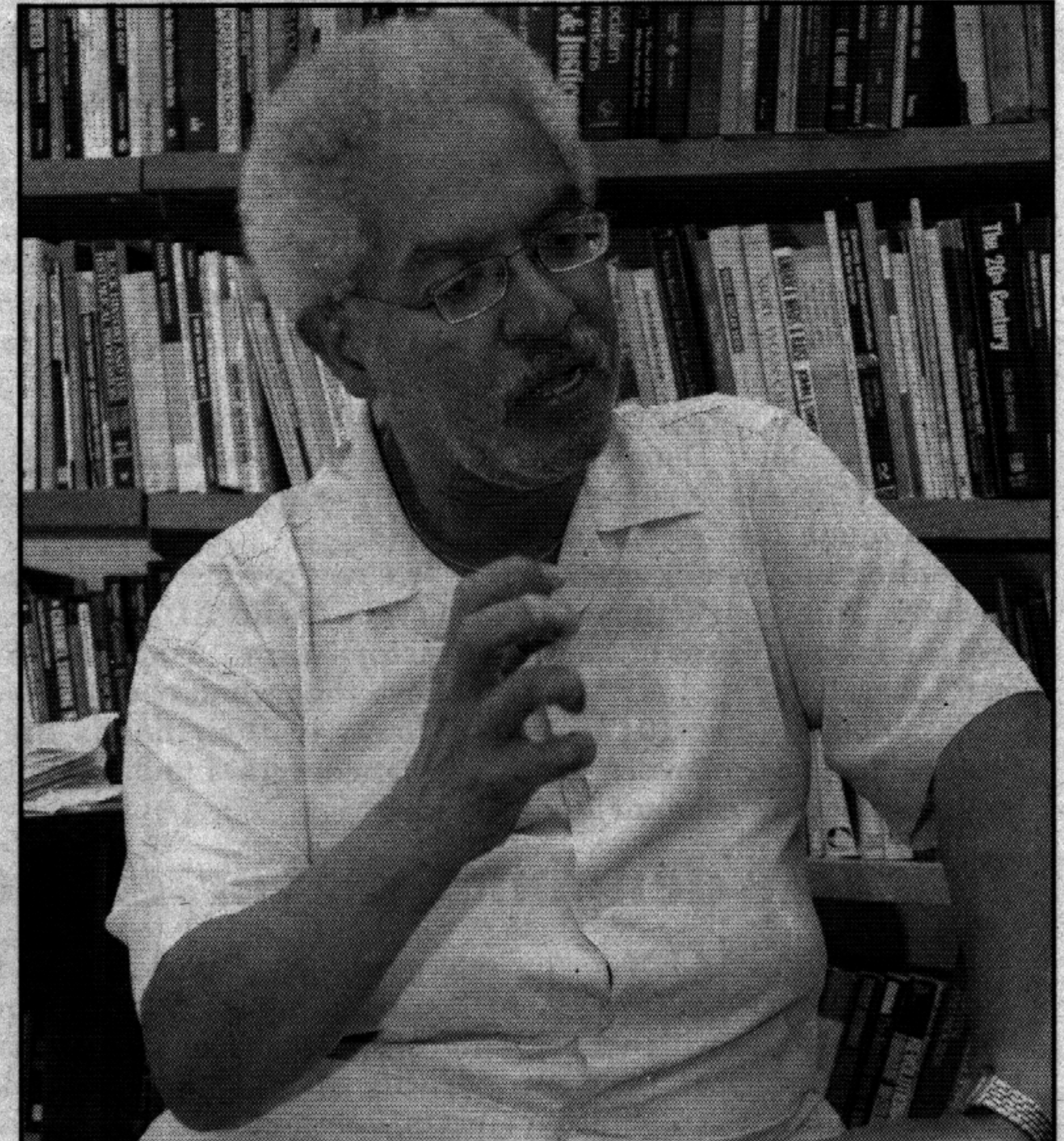
for Contemporary Black History, Marable has helped file some of the edges off of the jagged relationship the institute and the community have suffered over the years.

By sponsoring free forums and conferences on topics such as reparations and mass incarceration in the community, the Institute for African-American Affairs under Marable's direction helped Columbia—once seen as an icy tower to the community pulsing around it.

However, it's the change Marable has sparked within the institution that brings him the most joy. Ten years ago Marable convinced the university, which didn't keep accurate track of the numbers or success rates of students of color matriculating through their graduate school programs, to establish a minority advisory committee that would.

Since 1995 the committee has helped Columbia increase enrollment levels of graduate students of color, retain these students and more than double the scholarship funds available to them.

"Over the course of 10 years, my committee gave away several millions of dollars to support Black doctoral students who would not have had that funding, and I'm very proud of that,"



"Without a sense of history," explains Dr. Manning Marable, "how can you possibly know where you are going? If you don't have a sense of what has led us to this point, how can you re-imagine the possibilities for the future?"

(Natasha Grant photo)

Marable shares.

The scholar has strong interest in the students and generations coming behind him, particularly the hip-hop generation.

"I had to learn to master much of that culture, even though it's not mine," said Marable, who talks as leisurely about Grand Master Flash, Public Enemy and Tupac as he does about DuBois, Medgar Evers and Malcolm X.

the future of Black politics for the scholar," but warns that the evils that figures battled 30 years ago are much more subtle today.

"The signs reading 'white' and 'colored' have been taken down," said Marable, who says the hip-hop generation has to fight a color-blind leviathan that seeks to imprison them in a system of mass unemployment, mass incarceration and mass disenfranchisement.

Till's body exhumed and reburied

tion," said Marable, who acknowledges the hip-hop movement as the new revolution following in the tradition of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements.

"The strengths of the hip-hop vision, the activism, and many of the things that Russell Simmons and P. Diddy are doing [like] the vote or die campaign in 2004 ... are things that are crucially important to framing

Crow system we faced 40 years ago," he said.

Nearly forty years after the mourning at Dr. King's funeral at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Marable now laments for his children's generation.

"I feel tremendous pain and tremendous sympathy for young people confronting the nature of a society that is deeply racist," he added.