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New Orleans, La. — Scores of locals will be part of the commemorative "March on Washington" Saturday to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the event that helped turn a big page in the nation's civil rights history. Meanwhile, some locals who took part in the 1963 march reflect on what the historic event meant then and now.

On August 28, 1963, more 200,000 people marched through the District of Columbia to the Lincoln Memorial, calling for jobs and freedom.

"It was once in a lifetime we felt, if you didn't go now it'll never happen again," said Rev. Samson "Skip" Alexander, who participated in the march on the hot August day.

The journey to Washington had been a difficult one. Segregation ruled the south. There had been many marches, and speeches around the country. Alexander, who worked with King and other civil rights leaders on numerous activities remembers how New Orleanians were excited to be heading north for 1963 March on Washington.

"We were in an old raggedy bus that was out of Harvey, Louisiana...They didn't know how we were going to get back but all we had to do there is get there, they said, and we'd have food and we sleep on the bus and then we could go to the hotel and they'd give us permission to wash up," he said.

Other locals played important roles not only at the March on Washington, but throughout the south.

"I joined Rev. [Avery] Alexander and others on the picket lines, then ultimately got involved in the sit-ins on Canal Street," recalls Jerome Smith, a "freedom rider" during the turbulent days of segregation in the south.

He weathered brutal beatings as a "freedom rider," but relished his participation in the March on Washington. Still, he said much work remains to be done to cure social injustices.

"One of the things that was at the march that impressed me more than anything was that it was a collective feeling for goodness. And one of the failures of the march, we were not able to maintain that feeling during this 50 years," Smith said.

King's speech came at the end of a very long program at the Lincoln Memorial.

"Mahalia Jackson said it before she got near Dr. King she wanted him to preach, and this why when he was on his speech and she was saying Martin, Martin, the dream Martin, the dream Martin," said Smith.

Alexander recounts how Dr. King started off slowly in his address, and did not immediately mesmerize the crowd -- but he said that changed as King's words began to crescendo.

"And we were just talking and whatever and he said 'I have dream,' and everybody stopped, everybody stopped and looked forward at the podium... It meant that there was a dream coming and that everybody would be free," stated Alexander.

"It was a glorious time for blacks to talk about this notion of jobs and freedom and how this was going to expand the American dream, not just for blacks, but for America as well," said Dr. Dorothy Vick Smith, historian for Dillard University.

Five decades later, students from Dillard and Southern Universities joined in Saturday's march.

"It's really, really important I feel for the youth to be here to have a voice, to network with older people who were here 50 years ago," said Nicole Tinson, a Dillard student who traveled to Washington for the march.

"Out of this will come many leaders. Out of this will come many whites and blacks who will unite together," Alexander said of the events marking the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington.
