King lived long enough to see the growth of Black elected officials, but not a Black president.

By GEORGE E. CURRY

Rev. Joseph Lowery is a civil rights icon. He participated in all of the epic civil rights battles of his day, including the Montgomery, Ala. bus boycott, the violent showdown with “Bull” Connor in Birmingham, the Selma-to-Montgomery March and the famous 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Justice. He was a co-founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rev. Ralph Abernathy, Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth and others.

Lowery presided over the Atlanta-based SCLC from 1977-1997, a tenure as long as the combined time of his two predecessors, Dr. King and Abernathy, and longer than the combined service of all five presidents who succeeded him.

On Sunday, a star-studded gala was held at the Atlanta Symphony Hall to celebrate Lowery’s 90th birthday, which was Thursday, October 6. Fellow civil rights icons C.T. Vivian, Stevie Wonder, Jennifer Holiday, the Blind Boys of Alabama and others participated in the celebration.

Joseph Echols Lowery, who was born October 6, 1921 in Huntsville, Ala., always jokes that one has to be a little crazy to practice nonviolence in the face of violence and brutality – but it’s what Lowery calls “good crazy.”

President Obama discussed the concept last month in his dinner speech before the Congressional Black Caucus.

“A few years back, Dr. Lowery and I were together at Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church in Selma,” Obama recounted. “… And Dr. Lowery stood up in the pulpit and told the congregation the story of Shadrach and Meshach and Abednego in the fiery furnace. You know the story – it’s about three young men bold enough to stand up for God, even if it meant being thrown in a furnace. And they survived because of their faith and because God showed up in that furnace with them.

“Now, Dr. Lowery said that those three young men were a little bit crazy. But there’s a difference, he said, between good crazy and bad crazy. Those boys, he said, were ‘good crazy.’ At the time, I was running for president – it was early in the campaign. Nobody gave me much

of a chance. He turned to me from the pulpit and indicated that someone like me running for president – well, that was crazy. But he supposed it was good crazy.”

Without the 1965 Selma-to-Montgomery Voting Rights March that originated at Brown Chapel in Selma, Barack Obama would not be in the White House, a fact the president freely acknowledges.

As much as President Obama has lauded Lowery, from selecting him to deliver the benediction at his inauguration to awarding him the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian award in the nation, that’s not where Lowery made his greatest contribution. His greatest impact was breaking down racial barriers in the Deep South and giving African-Americans hope, even hope that one day an African-American family would live in the White House.

I know that from personal experience. Growing up Black in Tuscaloosa, Ala. during the 1950s and early 1960s meant riding in the “colored” section at the back of the bus. It meant drinking from separate water fountains and using “colored” restrooms. America’s version of apartheid didn’t allow African-Americans – actually, we called ourselves Negroes back then – to try on clothes in department stores or eat in the same restaurants as Whites. A decade after Brown v. Board of Education, we attended separate schools and lived in different neighborhoods.

I was thrilled when Lowery, Dr. King, Abernathy, Andy Young, James Orange, Jim Bevel, Harold Middlebrook, Dick Gregory and other civil rights warriors would come to Tuscaloosa to support T.Y. Rogers, the head of our local SCLC chapter. They instilled deep pride in me and thousands like me. We dreamed of a better day and that day was realized because of the work of Lowery and others with an abundance of courage and dedication.

President Obama said at the CBC, “Dr. Lowery – I don’t think he minds me telling that he turns 90 in a couple weeks. He’s been causing a ruckus for about 89 of those years.”

Although I didn’t know it while growing up during that tumultuous period, I would get to know Lowery later in life. In addition to both of us being from Alabama, we also share the same alma mater – Knoxville College in Tennessee. Two years ago, I gave the commencement address at Alabama A&M University, when Lowery was presented an honorary doctorate. As a journalist, I’ve interviewed him dozens of times, but none were as special as the 1-hour conversation we

had on Wednesday, the same day Fred Shuttlesworth died in Birmingham at the age of 89. With Dr. King, Ralph Abernathy, Hosea Williams and now Shuttlesworth deceased, not many old civil rights warriors remain on the scene.

Only Lowery, C.T. Vivian, Andrew Young and a few other stalwarts remain.

When I asked Lowery how he was able to remain on the civil rights battlefield so long, he replied, “I felt a calling and because I felt God called me to work in the struggle, He would be with me. So, I didn’t feel alone. I worried about my family sometimes. But worry about my own well-being was minimal because I felt I was answering a call. I am thankful that He stayed with me.”

That faith was evident when Lowery and his wife of 64 years, Evelyn, got involved in the case of Tommy Lee Hines in Decatur, Ala. Hines, who at 25 was diagnosed with the IQ of a 6-year-old, was accused of raping three White women in 1978. Hines did not attend school until he was 20 and was unable to assist in his own defense. He was found guilty by an all-White jury and sentenced to 30 years in prison.

“Tommy Lee Hines was mentally handicapped,” Lowery explained. “He couldn’t ride a bicycle yet they accused him of driving a car when he raped these women.”

Lowery, then president of SCLC, help lead a protest that summer in Decatur. Ku Klux Klan Imperial Wizard Bill Wilkenson rallied his local forces.

“The news media came and said, ‘The Klan is waiting downtown and they say they’re going to kill you,’” Lowery recalled. “I still went on. I probably should have said, ‘We’re going to go tomorrow.’”

After reaching downtown Decatur, the protesters were beaten and three were shot, though not fatally. Because of the heightened danger, women were not allowed to march that day. Mrs. Lowery followed demonstrators in a car. One bullet pierced her windshield, prompting her to duck. While her head was down, a second bullet whizzed past the steering wheel.

Like her husband, Mrs. Lowery accepted the danger that accompanied ground-breaking civil rights work.

“It was a narrow escape, but I knew that we were all in together,” she told Atlanta Woman magazine. “I was part of the Civil Rights Movement and I became very focused. I knew why God had put me here.”

After being attacked by the KKK in Decatur, Joseph Lowery returned the next day with 10,000 additional marchers.

Of the many civil rights struggles he has been engaged in, Lowery doesn’t hesitate when asked about the one that stands out most.

“If I had to pick one – and you would hold me to it – I would say the campaign for the right to vote,” Lowery stated. Dr. King appointed Lowery as chairman of a committee to present the demands of Selma-to-Montgomery marchers to Alabama Gov. George C. Wallace. However, Wallace refused to meet with Lowery and his committee.

“They wanted to take the demands and give them to the governor but I wouldn’t give them to them,” Lowery stated. “We had marched 50 miles. I wasn’t going to give them to the secretary.” Wallace met with Lowery several weeks later and received the demands to expand voting rights protection.

The highlight of the 1965 campaign was witnessing President Lyndon B. Johnson, a Southerner, signing the 1965 Voting Rights Act that paved the way for increased voter participation, especially in the Deep South. Borrowing a phrase from a popular civil rights song, Johnson proclaimed, “We shall overcome.”

King lived long enough to see the growth of Black elected officials, but not a Black president.

“I’ve lived long enough to see an African-American president,” Lowery said, still beaming with pride. “When we got the Voting Rights Act passed, we all thought there would be a Black president one day. But none of us believed we would live long enough to see it, I certainly didn’t. The Lord let me live to see it and he let me participate in his inauguration. Then, he gave me the highest award in the nation bestowed on a civilian. I wish so much that people like Martin, Ralph, T.Y. Rogers, Hosea and the others could have lived to see the day we have a Black president.”

When asked how he would like to be remembered, Lowery paused for several seconds.

“I guess I want them to remember that I was a small-town preacher, from a small town in North Alabama, who tried to apply the moral imperatives of the faith to social and political problems,” he said. “That’s all I was trying to do.”

That and being good crazy.