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TALKING TO CORETTA

By Cara Feinberg, Globe Correspondent

The last thing Coretta Scott King wanted to talk about was her first date with Martin.

She'd been seated for a marathon of back-to-back telephone interviews in January 2003, and I was the next reporter in line on day two of her annual Martin Luther King Jr. Day observances. Reporters would be allotted 10 minutes with her on the phone. "NO EXCEPTIONS," one of her public relations people wrote in a pre-interview e-mail. You were given a time to call, and if you missed it, you missed her.

My 10 minutes with Coretta began with a lapse into silence.

I had been writing a piece for City Weekly about Martin Luther King Jr.'s life in Boston as a theology graduate student at Boston University and hoped an interview with Coretta might help piece the story together. I'd spent a week walking around the South End where he lived, eating at restaurants he frequented, knocking on doors, trying to put together a picture of life on Massachusetts Avenue in 1951. I'd heard three different stories about how he met Coretta: at the Twelfth Baptist Church in Roxbury, at a party in Watertown, on a blind date at a Massachusetts Avenue diner. And there seemed to be several versions of Martin, too: He was "a struggling doctoral student," "a pious preacher's son," "a man about town with a new Chevy."

I began my conversation with Coretta by retelling the conflicting stories I'd heard. "So how did you meet Martin?" I asked her. On her end, there was silence.

"Are you going to ask me anything about the holiday?" she asked, following with a skeptical "uh-hmm" when I tactfully answered, "no."

"Well . . . I hope that . . . well . . . all right, then," she said, tamping down clear disapproval with a hurried, fake chuckle. "Let's move."

She began in an emotionless monotone, recounting a cursory chain of events as if reading from a laundry

list. "The truth is, Martin and I met on the telephone," she said. She was a first-year student at the New England

Conservatory of Music, she reported matter-of-factly; a friend introduced them.

But as she described that first phone conversation with Martin, her voice began to soften and she slowed down her rapid stream of words. "He said, 'I like the way you talk, and I'd like to meet you,'" she recounted, giggling. "We agreed to meet for lunch the next day at Sharaf's on Massachusetts Avenue, and he said, 'I usually make it in 10 minutes, but tomorrow, I'll make it in 7.'"

For the next 10 minutes of my conversation with Coretta, she did not stop talking.

She walked me through their courtship (a year and four months): "On our first date, he deliberately asked a question that had to do with capitalism versus communism . . . I remember I made an intelligent comment, and he said, 'Oh, I see you know something other than music.' I thought, of course I did. I was a graduate of Antioch College. I had thoughts of my own." And then, at the end of the first date, "He said, 'You know, you have everything I ever wanted in a wife: intelligence, character, beauty, and personality. When can I see you again?' I said I really didn't know because I had a tight schedule."

Martin was a man who knew where he was going in his personal life as well as his public life as an activist, she said. She described how, when they'd go out, women would swoon and greet him with " 'Oh Martin this,' and 'Oh Martin

that.' " But he knew what kind of wife he was looking for, she said, and "he was always trying to convince me I was it."

When they met, Coretta had envisioned several years in school and a career as a singer after graduation.

Martin wanted to get married right away, "but I kept struggling with my own ambitions for a long time," said Coretta. "I knew getting married would lead me away from performing and the direction I'd hoped to go."

Seventeen minutes later, after telling her assistant she'd "get off the phone in a moment," Coretta finished the story.

"We got married in 1953, and the rest is history," she said. "When I finally opened myself to the relationship, I knew this was my direction."

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