

James E. Clyburn



ITEM FILE PHOTO

Congressman James Clyburn greets Stacey Gaymon in April during the Festival on The Avenue in Sumter.

Clyburn's memoir to tell a personal, historic story

BY JOHN MONK
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U.S. Rep. Jim Clyburn, D-S.C., a major state and national civil rights figure, will publish his autobiography next spring.

It likely will contain some little-known anecdotes about what makes Clyburn, a Sumter native, tick and personal glimpses of how he interacted with history and, in some cases, may have altered history.

The University of South Carolina Press is the publishing house. Although he had some help at first from the late Phil Grose, a former journalist, Democratic insider and S.C. gubernatorial biographer, Clyburn wrote most of the book himself, he said. Clyburn received no monetary advance for the book.

Its title is "Blessed Experiences: Genuinely Southern, Proudly Black," according to the USC Press. The title is derived from one of his father's favorite Christian hymns, "Blessed Assurance," which con-

tains the lines, "This is my story, this is my song." Clyburn said Monday at a Columbia Rotary Club lunch.

So, despite the urging of his mother, who wanted him to go North to college, Clyburn, who grew up in Sumter, went to S.C. State in Orangeburg.

In 1960, while a senior at S.C. State, Clyburn said he travelled to Atlanta with other activists to meet Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who had been urging people to practice peaceful civil disobedience and go to jail to make a statement.

"Up until October 1960, Dr. King had never been to jail. So a few of us challenged him, stayed up until 4 a.m. the next morning ... we really had a tony meeting."

The next weekend, Clyburn said, King finally allowed himself to be arrested and went to jail for the first time. While he was in jail, Democratic presidential candidate John F. Kennedy called King's wife to express sympathy. Kennedy's opponent, Richard Nixon, did not.

"Up until that phone call was made — and this shocks a lot of people — the vast majority of the black vote in the United States was going to Richard Nixon — and that's a fact," Clyburn said.

But because Kennedy reached out to King's wife, most blacks switched their vote to Kennedy, who went on to win the presidency by a narrow margin, Clyburn said.

Clyburn, who has served in Congress 21 years, represents South Carolina's 6th Congressional District, a sprawling collection of counties from Columbia to the southern Georgia-S.C. border to Charleston.

He is the No. 3-ranking Democrat in the U.S. House and is close to President Obama.

His career spans the civil rights era, and as a young person he was a civil rights organizer and jailed numerous times in local S.C. jails because of his participation in protests seeking equal rights for blacks.