

A Conversation with Calvin Hilton and Mike Schmidt: Remembering Martin Luther King Jr.

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In remembrance and celebration of Martin Luther King Jr. and his contributions, Mike Schmidt, SVP, Credit Risk, sat down with Calvin Hilton, Chief Diversity Officer, to reflect on his personal experience, the importance of Dr. King's legacy and Alliance Data's commitment to promoting inclusion, equality and respect for all.

*Editor's note: some responses have been edited for brevity

Mike: If I think about the message and legacy of Dr. King and your experience, what is your first recollection and memory of Dr. King?

Calvin: My first recollection of him is around 1966 or 1967, when I was 10 or 11 years old. My most fond memory was that my dad used to listen to an LP, and every week I would listen to my dad play a recording from 1963 from the "I Have a Dream" speech, and he would listen to that over and over and over again. And I didn't understand what it meant, but every now and then I would see tears in my dad's eyes as he would listen. And it wasn't until some years later that I really started to appreciate what my dad had gone through.

Mike: Talk to me a little bit about growing up. Where did you grow up and go to school?

Calvin: I'm from North Carolina and I grew up in a small town called Monroe, about 20 miles south of Charlotte. I grew up in segregated schools, so my first five years I went to a secondary school which was all black. There was eventually forced integration, but, people talk about "separate but equal." When I looked at the books in my elementary school and I saw five or six different names, I had no idea that they weren't only secondhand, but second generation.

In high school, our mascot was a rebel – not a rebel like you're thinking, but an actual plantation owner. It was a largely segregated school, but, it was my hometown and where I grew up and was what I knew. I was in a segregated Boy Scout troop. I was the first person in my family to go to an integrated school.

Mike: Can you talk to me about when you heard that Dr. King had been assassinated? How was that perceived by you, your family and your community?

Calvin: I can still remember when I heard about Dr. King being killed. I was in the sixth grade and it was my first year in an integrated school. My sixth grade teacher happened to be black and that morning she pulled me aside and she said, "They killed Dr. King." And I had a classmate that day say, "we got him." We got him. That's really tough. My parents never said much about that to me, but I still remember my dad listening again to "I Have a Dream" over and over that day. It's pretty powerful.

Mike: When you focus on Alliance Data's DE&I journey, how have you seen diversity, equity and inclusion change over time?

Calvin: When you take a look at where we are now, and if you take a look at what Alliance Data and other companies are doing now, there's a lot more emphasis on the equity and inclusion parts of DE&I. So that's where you start to become more holistic when you put those things together - that's the sweet spot. That's what I think we're all searching for.

Mike: That's a great point, because diversity with inclusion doesn't really encourage people to engage and take the opportunity to learn from others.

Calvin: The example I used to use when I was recruiting people - I said, "I grew up in North Carolina. It's where I learned to read and where I learned to write." Mike, I'm not sure where you grew up, but my guess is that we both learned how to read and write differently, but the key is that today we can both read and we can both write. Diversity, equity and inclusion means that I should be able to learn something from the way you learn. You should be able to learn something from the way I learned and we can spend time together to make something better. That's diversity, equity and inclusion to me.

Mike: When you look ahead, and you look at the journey Alliance Data is on in 2022, what are some of the things that you're looking forward to?

Calvin: I had a chance to think about this conversation today, and go back and take a look at our mission statement, and I have to tell you that I'm so proud of the work that the team has done and I'm so proud of the buy-in that we've had from the senior leadership team around DE&I. I want to read a piece of that to you: "We're committed to creating a culture that attracts and values diversity of thought, experience, backgrounds, skills and ideas." Giving associates the opportunity to thrive within their workplace and contribute to the success of the organization. That's powerful stuff. Promoting an inclusive workplace that reflects the diversity of our cardmembers, brand partners, shareholders

and communities is essential to Alliance Data's long-term growth and sustainability. It's inspiring, and it says a lot about who we are as an organization and where we want to go.

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