

CHESTO MEANS BUSINESS

How one Boston-area entrepreneur's dream sparked the movement that led to the new King memorial

New memorial on the Common began with a timely visit to an MLK monument in San Francisco.

By **Jon Chesto** Globe Staff, Updated January 15, 2023, 1 hour ago



From left to right, the Rev. Liz Walker, the Rev. Jeffrey Brown, and Paul English stood with The Embrace, the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. memorial sculpture that they helped to bring to Boston, on Friday. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

Whenever entrepreneur Paul English has an hour to spare while visiting San Francisco, he tries to stop by the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial, in Yerba Buena Gardens.

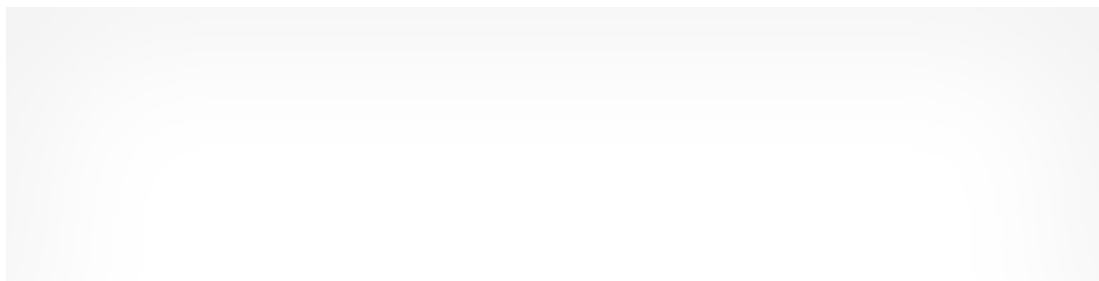
He walks behind its waterfall, the noise from the cascade shielding him from the city's din, and reflects on King's words inscribed on the glass panels.

But one of those visits, in September 2017, was different: English also reflected on the country's increasing political divisiveness, the disturbing rise of white nationalism, and what the most famous of civil rights leaders would make of it all. Then a bold thought occurred to him, a crazy dream: Shouldn't his hometown of Boston have a similarly spectacular MLK memorial, particularly given the city's formative role in the lives of Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King, the city where the pair met and fell in love?

English, then the chief technology officer at travel-tech firm Lola.com, didn't wait. He opened up his laptop on the plane back to Logan. He plugged into the jet's Wi-Fi, created a Google doc, set up a website, and began firing off e-mails and brainstorming. He was determined. The King memorial would happen.

That fateful trip set in motion a years-long quest, one that culminated Friday in the unveiling of The Embrace, a 22-foot high bronze sculpture on Boston Common inspired by a photo of Coretta and Martin hugging after they learned he won the Nobel Peace Prize. By that point, English had seemingly enlisted much of the city in this ambitious vision. He was now only one of many players pursuing this bold dream.

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But it wouldn't have happened without his perseverance, or his generosity.



A message on display on the wall at The Embrace sculpture as a guest took a photo on Friday. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

Roughly one week after his plane touched down that day in 2017, English met with Joyce Linehan, chief of policy for then-mayor Marty Walsh. Others had tried to get a major King memorial built in Boston, but those efforts never went far. (Boston University, where King studied theology, does have an outdoor sculpture in his honor, resembling doves in flight.) Linehan told Walsh that English was the kind of person who could pull it off.

English, who made most of his money from the sale of Kayak to Priceline a decade ago, committed \$1 million to get things started. Although English didn't say it at the time, he was prepared to backstop the fund-raising, to cover any shortfall. But he also wanted to involve others. This wasn't meant to be about him, but about the city.

Walsh bought into English's dream immediately. The proposal came to the mayor's attention right before his annual speech to the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce. Walsh previously prodded chamber members to prioritize diversity and equity. The King memorial fit that theme, and Walsh announced the plans at the chamber meeting on Sept. 20.

English initially thought he could get it built by MLK Day in January 2019. Linehan knew permitting, let alone construction, probably wouldn't be done by then. She advised English to reach out to the city's Black leaders and get their involvement and to hold community meetings to vet where the memorial should go and what it should look like. For his co-chairs, English quickly enlisted Liz Walker, the former TV journalist and minister, and Jeffrey Brown, a pastor at Twelfth Baptist Church in Roxbury where Martin Luther King Jr. had preached.

Pretty soon, English was touring the Common with Chris Cook, Walsh's parks commissioner, looking at potential locations. Cook worked under former mayor Tom Menino when a spot was selected for a King memorial on City Hall Plaza, but those plans fizzled in the Great Recession. This time, Cook thought, was different. English had money to contribute. More importantly, he had stick-to-it-iveness, Cook recalled, and an enthusiasm that is tough to rebuff.

The concept for The Embrace, by artist Hank Willis Thomas and MASS Design Group, was chosen from more than 130 submissions in a city-sponsored competition in 2019. The general consensus was that the Common was the best spot because of its prominent location downtown, on the Freedom Trail, and because Martin Luther King famously spoke there in 1965. English knew the unusual design would be seen as radical by many,

particularly for the Common. But he wanted something that would stand out and inspire discussions, instead of just blending in.



The Embrace was dedicated on Friday at its location on Boston Common. Guests gathered around the sculpture after its unveiling. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

The community, meanwhile, also wanted something to honor the Kings' legacy in Roxbury. And so the mission of what was King Boston, now called Embrace Boston, grew to include plans for a 31,000-square-foot center for research into racial inequities in Roxbury that will double as a museum and a local marketplace. As a result, fund-raising has far exceeded the roughly \$10 million cost to build and maintain the memorial. Corporate Boston, in particular, broke out the checkbooks after George Floyd's murder in 2020.

Imari Paris Jeffries, executive director of Embrace Boston, says at least \$31 million has been committed so far. (Embrace Boston, now part of the Boston Foundation, will eventually become a standalone nonprofit.) The memorial is just the starting point.

English is 59 now and thinking about his own legacy. He's still busy in the startup world; he recently launched a restaurant review app called Deets. But he also finds deep satisfaction in his nonprofit endeavors: a charity in Haiti called Summits Education, an annual "Winter Walk" to raise awareness about homelessness in Boston and soon New York, a new project with Mass. General Hospital to help young people with bipolar disorder. (English has been open about his own struggles with bipolar disorder.)

Then there's Embrace Boston.

English grew up in West Roxbury during desegregation. The busing crisis of his childhood remains fresh in his mind. So the normally gregarious entrepreneur had a hard time describing his emotions Friday as the crowd assembled on Boston Common for the unveiling of the memorial. It was overwhelming, he said, to stand there in the January mist, as a diverse mix of political, business, and community leaders gathered under the tents behind him.

He glanced over at The Embrace. He pictured what it would be like to return on a warmer, sunny June day, to eavesdrop on a conversation among visitors as they wondered about this unique structure — what it meant, how it got there.

Who knows? Maybe it would inspire some of them to have their own bold thoughts, their own crazy dreams.



Demond Martin (left) and Paul English walked to the stage together to speak when The Embrace sculpture was unveiled on Boston Common on Friday. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

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