

John Cordice, 95; helped save Martin Luther King

By David B. Caruso | ASSOCIATED PRESS JANUARY 01, 2014

NEW YORK — Dr. John W.V. Cordice, a New York City surgeon who was part of the medical team that saved Martin Luther King Jr. from a nearly fatal stab wound in 1958, died Sunday at the age of 95.

The death was announced Tuesday by the city agency that oversees Harlem Hospital Center, where Dr. Cordice was formerly an attending surgeon and chief of thoracic surgery.

“He was a brilliant clinical practitioner, a wise and thoughtful teacher, and a man of deep and abiding kindness and quiet modesty,” said Alan D. Aviles, president of city Health and Hospitals Corp. “It is entirely consistent with his character that many who knew him may well not have known that he was also a part of history.”

Dr. Cordice, a native of Durham., N.C., was off duty when King was taken to the hospital after being stabbed by a mentally disturbed woman as he signed books in Harlem. The blade, a letter opener, was still stuck in the civil rights leader's chest, millimeters from his aorta, when Dr. Cordice arrived from Brooklyn.



2012 FILE

Surgeon John W.V. Cordice removed a letter opener from Martin Luther King Jr. after he was stabbed.

The operation to remove the 7-inch piece of steel was overseen by Dr. Aubre Maynard, the hospital's chief surgeon, and performed by Dr. Cordice and Dr. Emil Naclerio.

King, then 29 and already a name in national politics, was discharged 14 days later. He was assassinated in 1968.

"I think if we had lost King that day, the whole civil rights era would have been different," Dr. Cordice said in a Harlem Hospital promotional video in 2012.

In his final public speech, King talked about that close brush with mortality, noting the blade's close proximity to his vital organs.

"If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been around here in 1960, when students all over the South started sitting-in at lunch counters," he said. "If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been around here in 1961, when we decided to take a ride for freedom and ended segregation in interstate travel . . . If I had sneezed I wouldn't have been here in 1963, when the black people of Birmingham, Ala., aroused the conscience of this nation, and brought into being the Civil Rights Bill. If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have had a chance later that year, in August, to try to tell America about a dream that I had had."

Dr. Cordice earned his medical degree at New York University and practiced medicine in the city for 40 years. He lived in Harlem and then Queens, where he was a surgical chief at the Queens Hospital Center.



JOHN LENTT/AP

Martin Luther King Jr. recovering from surgery Sept. 21, 1958.