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TN's human rights agency celebrates first 50 years

Commission honors leaders, organizations

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Tennessee Human Rights Commission honoree Charles Kimbrough, left chats with his grandson Jaylon Strong, 5, at Tennessee State Museum. / John Partipilo / The Tennessean

Written by Michael Cass The Tennessean

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The state's civil rights enforcement agency celebrated its first 50 years Thursday while casting a wary eye at the U.S. Supreme Court's arguments about a key provision of the Voting Rights Act.

The Tennessee Human Rights Commission, created in 1963 under a slightly different name, gathered at the Tennessee State Museum to talk about its first half-century and to honor some of Nashville's most prominent human rights advocates.

The commission is responsible for enforcing laws that prohibit discrimination based on race, sex, disability, age and other factors while barring retaliation in employment, housing and public

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Linda T. Wynn, a historian at Fisk University, spoke to the crowd about the Emancipation Proclamation, which was recently on display at the museum (a facsimile is still there), the Civil War and the modern civil rights movement, including several pivotal events from the year the commission was born.

Wynn concluded her remarks by addressing the Supreme Court's deliberations Wednesday on the Voting Rights Act, which Congress passed in 1965. Justice Antonin Scalia said the law is now a "perpetuation of racial entitlement."

Wynn sharply disagreed.

"Justice Scalia, voting is not an entitlement," she said. "It is the foundation of everything America stands for."

She then challenged the audience to "keep up the fight, for it appears that we're going to be in for new battles."

The commission honored 10 individuals and organizations:

- **George Barrett**, a Nashville civil rights lawyer who has represented student protesters, unions and plaintiffs who sued to desegregate the state's public higher education system.
- **Waverly Crenshaw**, a Nashville attorney who has devoted much of his time to human rights, diversity and nondiscrimination education.
- **Jane Eskind**, the first woman elected to statewide office in Tennessee (as a member of the Public Service Commission in 1980) and first female chairwoman of the Tennessee Democratic Party.
- State Sen. **Thelma Harper**, the first African-American woman elected to the Tennessee Senate and a former Metro councilwoman.
- Dr. **Charles Kimbrough**, a veterinarian who established and organized NAACP chapters throughout Tennessee and led the Nashville branch to new heights as its president from 1973 to 1980.
- **Rosetta Miller-Perry**, publisher of the Tennessee Tribune, founder of the Greater Nashville Black Chamber of Commerce and former area director of the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity



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Commission.

- **Tommie Morton Young**, the first African-American to graduate from Peabody College and an organizer of African-American genealogical societies in Tennessee and North Carolina.
- **Nashville for All of Us**, a coalition of businesses, organizations and individuals that worked to defeat a proposal that would have made English the official language of Nashville, requiring Metro government to do business in English only.
- **Tennessee Immigrant & Refugee Rights Coalition**, a statewide effort to empower immigrants and refugees to defend their rights.
- **YWCA of Middle Tennessee**, which has served women and girls in Nashville for more than 100 years and created a racial justice initiative.

Contact Michael Cass at 615-259-8838 or mcass@tennessean.com. Ask him a question on Twitter [@tnmetro](https://twitter.com/tnmetro).

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segregation

More than 50 years ago, a group of Nashville college students, fearless and determined, joined forces with local preachers to go to war with the segregated

South. On the front lines was John Lewis, now a longtime congressman, then a student. They sat at lunch counters. They rode buses. They marched.

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