NAME Statement on Rep. John Lewis’ Continuing Activism and the Need to Vote

The National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME) applauds U.S. Rep. John Lewis. Despite fighting stage 4 pancreatic cancer since his diagnosis in December, the Democrat from Georgia appeared at this year’s “Bloody Sunday” commemorative march in Selma, Alabama, to urge the thousands in attendance on March 1 at the Edmund Pettus Bridge to go out and vote like never before to “redeem the soul of America.”

Lewis has a long history of putting his life on the line for social justice and equity, including his work with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in the Civil Rights Movement and continuing as a congressman since 1987. He recalled at the march: “I thought I was going to die on this bridge. But somehow in some way, God almighty helped me here. We cannot give up now. We cannot give in.” On March 7, 1965, Lewis and Hosea Williams attempted to lead about 600 people on a 50-mile march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, demanding an end to discrimination in voter registration. However, state and local police using billy clubs and teargas attacked the marchers at the Edmund Pettus Bridge, driving them back to Selma. Lewis suffered a fractured skull. The violence prompted intervention from President Lyndon Johnson and the federal government to guarantee people’s safety. The nonviolent march actually took place March 21-25, 1965, starting with 3,200 people and ending in Montgomery with about 25,000. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law on Aug. 6, 1965, because of the attention the Selma to Montgomery march created around the brutal disenfranchisement of African Americans.

Lewis said at the march re-enactment: “We must use the vote as a nonviolent instrument or tool to redeem the soul of America.” Indeed, the country is as troubled now as it was 55 years ago because of the increasing disparity of wealth and systematic efforts to prevent people of color, students, older people, ex-offenders and poor people from voting in states throughout the nation. It is why NAME is having its landmark, 30th annual conference in Montgomery from Oct. 7-11, which will include efforts to help register people to vote as well as a commemorative march, covering the last mile to the Alabama State Capitol and rally on the Capitol steps. The conference is expected to attract more than 1,000 educators from across U.S. and beyond. The theme this year is “Living Multicultural Education: Peace and Justice thru the Ballot Box and Activism.”

Like Lewis, NAME promotes equity, social justice and activism. He urged the crowd in Selma to “get in good trouble, necessary trouble.” He added: “I’m not going to give up. I am not going to give in. I am going to continue to fight. We need your prayers now more than ever before.”

Like NAME, Lewis acknowledged that “Selma is a different place (today); America is a different place. But we can make it much better.” That’s NAME’s goal, too. Through Multicultural Education, the United States and countries across the world can be made better.