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By Katy Reckdahl

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Clarence B. Jones, who will speak Tuesday night at Dillard University as part of its annual “Brain Food” lecture series, is a well-known scholar and lawyer. He was the first African-American to become a partner in a Wall Street investment-banking firm.

But what Jones, 82, is likely to be best remembered for is six paragraphs he wrote 50 years ago.

Those paragraphs began the celebrated “I Have a Dream” speech, delivered by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. at the March on Washington in August 1963.

At the time, Jones was King’s personal attorney and one of his closest advisers. Speechwriting was just one of his duties, he said in a recent phone interview. Because of the importance of the march and his address to it, King had invited several key labor and civil-rights advocates to give him input on the speech.

During those meetings, Jones was the appointed note-taker and synthesizer. Afterward, he incorporated everyone’s suggestions, wrote a draft of the speech in longhand on yellow legal paper, and gave it to King. He expected his friend to change the text significantly, as he recounted in his 2011 book “Behind the Dream: The Making of the Speech that Transformed a Nation,” which he wrote with Stuart Connelly.

But the next day, as he listened to King deliver the speech to a crowd of more than 250,000 in front of the Lincoln Memorial, the words were very familiar. “A pleasant shock came over me as I realized that he seemed to be essentially reciting those suggested opening paragraphs I had

scrawled down the night before in my hotel room," Jones wrote.

In fact, it was exactly Jones' words. "He hadn't changed a sentence or even a comma," Jones said last week, in a strong voice that makes him sound like a man half his age.

Then, in what is now a well-known part of history, King's good friend, New Orleans-born gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, yelled out, "Martin — tell them about the dream." Jones saw King shift the prepared notes aside, grab the lectern and deliver the rest of the famous speech extemporaneously.

"The effect was nothing short of soul-stirring," Jones wrote.

Jones, whose specialty was intellectual property, also penned a small copyright symbol on the copies of King's speech given to reporters before the speech.

The handwritten symbol, he said, became a key part of legal opinions that have kept the speech out of the public domain; its proceeds have provided King's estate with a consistent source of income.

Jones relied upon his personal experience for the speech's fourth and fifth paragraphs, which compare America's promise with a defaulted promissory note.

Instead of fulfilling its promise, Jones wrote — and King read — "America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds.'"

They're now famous words. But they were written about a moment when Jones thought he himself might default on a debt he couldn't repay.