

Features

King's dream lives on through celebrations in Rochester

By Richard A. Kiley

The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. — who dreamed of a world free of prejudice and discrimination — was remembered by Rochesterians through a variety of presentations, ceremonies and celebrations during Mid-January.

By means of non-violent protest and forceful speeches, King endeavored to break down barriers between whites and blacks. The civil-rights leader was assassinated outside a Memphis, Tenn., motel on April 4, 1968. Had he lived, the Rev. King would have been 59 on Friday, Jan. 15; the national holiday observing King's birthday was celebrated Monday, Jan. 18.

At Nazareth Academy, students commemorated King's birthday with an assembly organized by the school's Black Student Union. BSU members performed a one-hour presentation, entitled "Hold Fast to Dreams . . . in Love," in the school auditorium on Friday, Jan. 15. Through a series of skits, poetry and songs, students attempted to illustrate King's legacy and his meaning for today.

"Students wanted to show how Martin Luther King represented the black community and how the community rallied around him," said Mary Rose McCarthy, moderator of the BSU at Nazareth.

McCarthy added that the focus of the student presentation this year centered more on the celebration of King's birthday than on the issue of racial inequality.

"The program reinforces the faith dimension and how Martin Luther King always tried to integrate justice," McCarthy said. "It also prepares (students) to understand Dr. King's message of non-violence."

BSU President Marietta Gamble delivered the opening speech of "Hold Fast to Dreams." The production also featured poems on such other civil rights activists as Harriet Tubman and Rosa Parks.

"We wanted to de-emphasize the hero and emphasize the community effort behind Dr. King," McCarthy said.

Reinforcing this concept of community involvement, the BSU choir also performed the King memorial service and gospel music tribute at St. Bridget's Church on Sunday, January 18.

Meanwhile, a team of six Cardinal Mooney High School students and their faculty director returned this weekend from Albany, where they had participated in awards ceremonies for the Martin Luther King Performing Arts Competition. The Mooney troupe was one of only two Rochester-area groups to compete in the competition's finals, which took place in late December.

For their contest entry, seniors Gail Balcerzak, Rod Campbell and Robert Ellis, juniors Shannon Wilson and Don Kieffer, and sophomore Lucy Gallucci performed a 15-minute drama based on Robert Crean's play "Prophet," which revolves around middle-class racial attitudes during the 1960s.

Director Robert Smyth, who has taught theology at Mooney the past four years, explained that competition entries had to relate to the King holiday and "emphasize the themes and



Bonnie Trafelet/Courier-Journal
Above — The Rev. Herman White Jr. leads The Revelation Choir, an interdenominational group, in song during a special service honoring Martin Luther King Jr. at St. Bridget's Church in Rochester. At right — Lucille Smith (left) and Francis Rogers perform a gospel song for the standing-room-only audience.



values King promoted during his lifetime." Students could enter four main categories: language arts, fine arts, performing arts and technical arts and sciences.

In an extremely close competition, Mooney finished fourth among the four finalists among high schools competing in the performing arts category. A mere 12 points separated first- and fourth-place finishers.

Awards, including a first-place prize of \$1,000, were handed out on King's birthday, Friday, Jan. 15. In all, more than \$15,000 in prizes was presented to 89 New York state students who competed in the third-annual competition at the Empire State Plaza in Albany.

The New York State Martin Luther King Jr. Commission sponsored the statewide contest. Commission Executive Director Thomas H. Cooper said the contest marked another indication that the awareness of what King stood for is growing.

"Since the contest began 1985, we have

steadily increased the number of participants. However, our greatest hope remains that the learning experience increases with the level of participation," Cooper said.

All winners received the Martin Luther King, Jr. Award for Excellence in Arts & Sciences, a bronze medal bearing the likeness of Dr. King. In addition, every student who entered the contest received a certificate of achievement

signed by Governor Cuomo and Commission Chairman Harry Belafonte.

But to Smyth, the most important thing Mooney competitors brought home was experience, gained both through the competition itself and preparations for it. Mooney students began planning for the contest as far back as last October.

"I think the kids spent as much time getting to know each other by talking about the (play's) meaning as they did on the mechanics of the play," Smyth said.

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