

Features

New book relates King's dream to pre-schoolers

By Rob Cullivan

ROCHESTER — Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. dreamed that someday "little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and little white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers." Three area residents, including a cartoonist for the *Courier-Journal*, have created a book in hopes of realizing the vision King stated at the civil rights march on Washington in 1963.

Entitled *Martin Luther King, Jr. — a Biography for Young Children*, the 24-page book is aimed at children between the ages of three and five. The book's authors, Carol Hilgartner Schlank and Barbara Metzger, who both teach young children, decided to write the book after failing to find any biographies of King for their students.

"There was literature for children that are older, but nothing for younger children," said Schlank, who teaches in the experimental pre-kindergarten program at #33 School on Webster Avenue. She said she needed to explain to her students why they were granted a holiday to honor the slain civil rights leader.

Metzger, the administrative head teacher at the Winton Road Nursery School, has collaborated with Schlank on a previous children's book entitled *A Room Full of Children*. They decided to write the King book in the summer of 1987, and approached the Rochester Association for the Education of Younger Children about publishing it locally. RAEYC, which had published the pair's first book, decided to do the same with their second work.

One of the publishing conditions the authors wanted from RAEYC was the right to pick the book's illustrator. RAEYC agreed to their request and the women began soliciting artists last summer. By November, they had decided upon John Kastner; a commercial illustrator and performing artist whose *Peace* cartoons can be seen occasionally on the *Courier-Journal's* editorial page. "We looked at a lot of different artists," Schlank said. "Out of all the artists, he understood best what we had in mind."

Kastner said that he admired King, and was intrigued by the prospect of illustrating a bio-



Artist John Kastner depicts a young Martin Luther King Jr. in a new pre-schoolers' biography.

graphy. "(King) has been one of my heroes for some time," Kastner said, noting that he admired the leader "primarily for his courage in adopting the philosophies of (Mahatma) Gandhi and (Henry David) Thoreau."

Yet, despite the job offer, Kastner admitted that he wasn't sure he should take it. "Initially, I thought that Barbara and Carol were flakes with just another nice idea for a book," Kastner said. But their localized approach to publishing appealed to the artist, who was wary of any attempts to market the book nationally. The odds against such an enterprise succeeding are about the same as those against winning the lottery, he said.

The odds against Kastner completing the



The book concludes with a grown-up Dr. King leading an integrated march for civil rights.

book's illustrations in time for the January 9 publishing date were formidable as well. "I would've loved to have a year to do this book," he said, noting he handed in his drawings exactly on deadline.

Kastner based his pictures on photographs of King's life culled from extensive library research. Models for the book's children included Kastner's own son. The bulk of the book's drawings depict King's childhood, and the leader's first awakenings to the racism he would someday fight.

Schlank commented that she and Metzger deliberately emphasized King's childhood in order to relate his beliefs to unsophisticated young audiences. For example, instead of trying to explain King's work in the civil rights movement, the leader is depicted as a young boy who is sorrowfully separated from his two best friends, both white, by their racist mother.

"A boycott is a very sophisticated concept for three- and four-year-olds," Schlank said, referring to King's non-violent protest tactics. "But 'Will you be my friend?' is very important." The book embodies the authors' belief that innocent children learn racist attitudes from adults. "You've got to be taught to be afraid," Schlank commented. "We want to be at the forefront of the attitude that you can be friends with anyone."

Friendliness is one of several attitudes the au-

thors want to encourage. Non-violence is another. The end of the book depicts King growing up and becoming a minister. Kastner's drawing shows him sitting at table with whites and blacks, while the text reads that "(King) taught people to use words, not fists, to solve problems."

One of the problems that the authors wanted to help solve was a lack of self-esteem among young black children. "I think it is really important for black children to have a strong identification with a strong black person," Schlank said, adding that it was "equally important for children from other ethnic groups to hear about (King) and know why he was important."

Metzger agreed with her colleague's assertion, and noted that she hopes children in suburban areas with a lower black population benefit from the book. "It's important for these children to be aware of what he was, and to see a black person in a very positive light."

The authors hope all children will emulate King's ambition, Metzger said. "We wanted young children to say 'He was a child like me. Maybe someday I can do something important and of value.'"

Copies of the book may be ordered from: RAEYC, Box 356, Henrietta, N.Y. 14467. The price is \$3.95 plus \$1 for shipping and handling per copy.



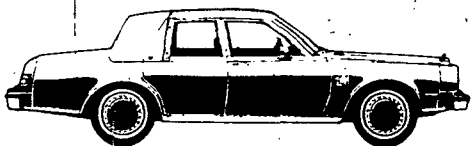
Local authors Carol Hilgartner Schlank and Barbara Metzger stressed King's ability to solve problems through discussion, not violence.

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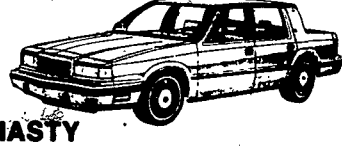


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