

KING

Continued from page 1

School, a junior missionary at True Gospel Church of God in Christ in Rochester.

The three seniors — Eric Bridle of Bishop Kearney High School; Janielle Harris of Rochester's Wilson Magnet High School; and Omar Rouchon of Greece Athena High School — read their essays before the audience of family, friends and parishioners.

"Dr. King has taught me the importance of being persistent through all of life's struggles," Omar said, adding: "Dr. King has also taught me that equality is the essential component of humanity."

Janielle noted that King's example of standing up for oneself helped her navigate the peer pressures of the teen world.

"Being a teenager, self-image is something of high importance," she said. "Therefore, there are many things and people that help to identify who you are. For many people, it may be a piece of clothing, a rapper or even a hairstyle. On the contrary, I look for characteristics that are morally right as well as religiously associated."

Eric noted in his essay that people fear being forgotten more than they fear death. However, he said, King's legacy did not seem to be in that kind of danger, and that he believed King feared something far more than being lost in the pages of history.

"I wish to make a difference as Dr. King has done, not because I fear being forgotten, but because, like Dr. King, I fear not helping enough."

CATHOLICS AND KING

Eric had spent a portion of the past few summers with his youth group from St. Helen's Parish in Gates, volunteering in Alabama, where King had dreamed of black and white children walking together. Eric noted that he and the other teens worked with a Sister of St. Joseph from the Diocese of Rochester to serve the poor and elderly. Interestingly, the Sisters of St. Joseph's now-defunct Good Samaritan Hospital in Selma, Ala., was one of only two hospitals in Selma willing to treat civil-rights protesters who'd been battered by police at a bridge on "Bloody Sunday" in 1965.

Indeed, although they were not in the forefront of the civil-rights movement, Catholics intersected with the movement at various times and in various ways, according to church historians. For example, a number of Catholic school systems were desegregated long before their public school counterparts, including the Catholic schools of Washington, D.C., which were integrated in



Jason Fearick/Catholic Courier

Jacquelyn and Tiffany Campbell, members of the gospel choir at Rochester's St. Bridget's Church, sing during the 16th Annual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Scholarship Awards Ceremony held at the church Jan. 12.

1947 by order of Archbishop Patrick O'Boyle. The archbishop gave the invocation prior to King's "I Have A Dream" speech, and Catholic clergy and religious responded in great numbers to King's call to come to Selma in 1965.

On the other hand, the church itself was shaken by the movement, and many reforms were introduced in its wake. For example, reaction to police actions during rioting over King's assassination in 1968 led, in part, to the formation of the Black Catholic Clergy Caucus that same year. The caucus demanded a greater role for black clergy and lay people, as well as leadership training, in dioceses throughout the country, according to *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* by Benedictine Father Cyprian Davis.

In the Diocese of Rochester, black Catholics and other African-Americans remembered King and the civil-rights movement as major forces that shaped their lives. David Greene, a hospitality minister at St. Bridget's, was, for example, the second black graduate of Rochester's Aquinas Institute, and said he didn't experience legal segregation until he served as an infantryman in World War II.

"The segregation thing hit me dead in the face," he said of his Army experience. "I went in the same door (whites) did, but came out a segregated door ... I was very, very resentful."

He said he recalled heated meetings with his fellow black soldiers, who argued over how to deal with segregation after their discharges.

"The ones that came from the South were pretty much resigned to going back to the separate facilities — the seat in the balcony at the movies, the seat in the back in the bus."

He also said he remembered the day King was killed.

"I think that I realized even then that we had lost one of our greatest champions," Greene recalled.

With apparent pride, he pointed out that he had traveled to Washington, D.C., several times in the 1980s to work for a national holiday for King. Opposition to the holiday in some quarters was hurtful to Nita Brown, a native of Ghana who serves as a lector and Eucharistic minister at Blessed Sacrament Church in Rochester. However, she likened America's civil-rights movement to the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, and noted that blacks there suffered strong opposition to asserting their rights for decades as well.

Brown said living in America made her want to learn more about King, and made her appreciate his impact on all African-Americans. She added that she plans to promote Black History Month through her parish bulletin by publishing information on such black Catholic saints as Augustine.

Sharing history also moved Dr. Stanley Rose, a choir member at St. Bridget's, to tell the St. Bridget's audience Jan. 12 about King, whom he met in 1967 while working as a photographer for a King biographer. Rose teaches African, Caribbean and black family history at the State University of New York at Brockport. In an interview after the ceremony, Rose mused that King was "catholic" in his own way.

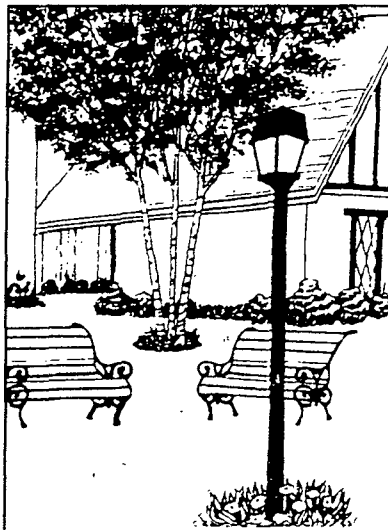
"The word 'catholic' means universal, and Martin Luther King's message was universal," Rose said.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Like King, Carmetha Harris, secretary at St. Monica's School in Rochester, is a Baptist. Yet she sends her children to Catholic schools where she said they can worship God freely, as opposed to being restricted from doing so in a public school. The daughter of an Alabama sharecropper mother, she remembered her mother talking about her great-grandparents who were born into slavery. Like King, her great-grandparents refused to be embittered by racism, and today Harris refuses to become cynical in an age when she said some of her fellow African-American have given up on political action. She noted that she chides black people who don't vote, for example.

"You owe it to your ancestors because they died for that reason, for that opportunity," she said she tells them. She added that work still needs to be done to fulfill the promise of the civil rights era.

"I guess we have to do it on an individual basis," she said, noting that she once worked as a high-school equivalency degree counselor for the Urban League. "You're not going to be on the TV set, and no one is going to know what you're going to do, but you're going to do."



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