

Artists Highlight MLK Celebration
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By Steve Smith, Staff Writer

The Glastonbury Martin Luther King Community Initiative's goal is simply to get people thinking and talking, and then allowing the results to unfold. The annual Martin Luther King Jr. celebration on Jan. 20 did just that, via the means of presenting some thought-provoking dramatic pieces, centered around King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" and its relevance to today's society.

Deacon Arthur L. Miller, director of the Office for Black Catholic Ministries, Archdiocese of Hartford, set the scene, explaining that King was jailed for leading non-violent protests in 1963, in response to bombings of black churches, homes and other institutions. The letter is the source of many of King's better-known quotes, including, "Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly," and was in response to eight white clergymen in the area who urged the black community to use only negotiations and the legal system to remedy violence.

Miller showed a video of the nine black students being denied entrance into their schools in Birmingham (later in 1963, but illustrating the tenor in that city at the times), and how one girl walked alone to the school, facing harassment and threats by herself until one white woman chose to help the girl to safety.

Miller said honoring King, including attending events and listening to speeches, makes no difference if people do nothing.

"That woman, who stood up for that little girl, did something," he said. "You have one chance to stand on the right side of justice. That woman, in that instance, was a hero, because she didn't worry about who was right, but she knew what was right."

Actor David H. Greer performed as King, composing that letter from his solitary confinement cell. Greer said he has been performing the piece for 22 years, and has altered it from time to time, but he felt enamored with the letter.

"This was something very intimate and very personal," he said. "I bored it down to what I thought was the essence."

The HartBeat Ensemble – Julia Rosenblatt, Cindy Martinez and Tanisha Duggan – performed a multi-media piece called "Can't Wait – Reflections on the Movement," which was commissioned exclusively for the Glastonbury event. The performance showed several aspects of how racism presents itself today, including discrimination against interracial marriage and how women of different races are treated by the media.

"The piece is largely derived from the letter, and the Christian churches and their response," Martinez said, "and contemporary texts. I pulled things from Kanye West and Jay Z because they are modern-day poets, and I pulled a lot of stuff directly from Twitter because it's current and it chronicles what is happening for us now. It's our literature – our modern literature."

HartBeat co-director Steve Raider-Ginsburg said the piece was designed to bridge the past with the present.

“One of the things that was very alive in our rehearsal room was the idea of how the conversation that was happening when King wrote the letter relates to the conversations that are happening now, and where they [are] happening and what the issues are based on,” Raider-Ginsburg said. “We tried to hone in on what our challenges are, and what we are willing to do, and the risks we are willing to take to face those challenges today.”

The performers left the audience with the notion of taking action for social change. Rosenblatt urged people to act against injustice taking place in Connecticut. “Right here, right now in the greater Hartford area, we have a city that is sinking and suburbs that are rising, and that is only going to end up in the wrong place,” she said.

“The locker room, Miller said. “This is the locker room. The game’s out there. Don’t you get prepared in the locker room and leave your uniform on only in here. Get out there and get in the game.”

“Communication is the key,” Greer said. “You can’t buy listening. You can’t buy teamwork. You can’t buy understanding. Before anything happens, you have to have communication.”

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