

MLK's Legacy Discussed 50 Years Later



King's Legacy Reviewed Along Several Topics (Steve Smith / Courant Community)



Steve Smith Staff Writer

The **Glastonbury Martin Luther King Community Initiative** marked the 50th anniversary of King's passing with a look at how his legacy has been carried out ever since.

Panelists were invited to speak about the progress of social justice in the areas of education, housing, immigration, health care, incarceration, and gender issues.

Jon Bauer, director of the Asylum and Human Rights Clinic at the University of Connecticut School of Law, spoke about how King's work with social justice relates to current immigration issues, such as the proposed ban on Muslims.

"This is an issue that Dr. King never spoke directly about," Bauer said. "It was not really seen, in the 1950s and '60s, as a central crisis that the country was facing."

Bauer said that some might claim that King would have a restrictive stance toward immigration, out of concern that undocumented workers would suppress wages for low-income workers.

"It's doubtful that would be his stance, because his central concerns in his speeches and his writings really point in a more inclusive direction," Bauer said, adding that the issues the country are facing now would have been of grave concern to him.

"What we've seen, in the last year and a half or so, is a return to the discriminatory immigration system that the 1965 Immigration Act was supposed to get rid of," Bauer said, citing the proposed barring of entry of 150 million people from around the world. "It's solely based their countries of origin. It's rooted in religious prejudice."

Erin Boggs, Glastonbury resident and executive director of Open Communities Alliance, said her civil rights organization promotes access to housing choice, and showed CT maps that clearly show that job opportunities in the state are higher where people of color do not live.

"Glastonbury, as you can see, is one of the highest areas of opportunity in the state," Boggs said.

"Seventy-three percent of blacks and Latinos are living in the two lowest of the five opportunity categories, compared to only 26-percent of whites, and 36-percent of Asians. We are highly segregated here in Connecticut."

Tekisha Dwan Everett, Ph.D., is the executive director of Health Equity Solutions. Everett said that inequities, such as those in healthcare, actually violate the Declaration of Independence, specifically the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

"We can't do any of the things in our life that we're talking about today without the pursuit of happiness and without health," she said, adding that King once said that injustice in healthcare is the worst of all forms of inequality.

"He did not often talk about health... but he had this wonderful statement, made in front of a convention of doctors, saying and making it clear that the injustice we have in healthcare is the most shocking and inhumane, and that you must do something about it. So, when we talk about... the dream of Dr. King, we have a lot of advances in our society. We have come so far, but when it comes to health, we are still lagging."

Kate Farrar is the executive director of the Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund, which has lobbied the state legislature on behalf of nonprofit organizations, and spoke about gender equality.

"We certainly have made progress," Farrar said, pointing out that women couldn't get a no-fault divorce until 1968, the year King died. "The role of women has dramatically changed. For one, more and more women are in the paid workplace. In 1969, women were only about a third of the workforce. Now, women are almost half the workforce."

Ames Grawert, Esq., counsel in the Brennan Center for Justice at the NYU School of Law, made convincing points about how the criminal justice system is "mass incarcerating" people of color.

"In the United States, we have the highest incarceration rate of any industrialized nation," Grawert said.

"People of color represent about 30 percent of the country, but they are two-thirds of the prison population. People of color... are more likely to be incarcerated for the same conduct [as whites]. This is

not in any way representing a higher level of criminality. People are more likely to come in contact with the criminal justice system if they are some race that is not white."

Camara Stokes Hudson, associate policy fellow for Juvenile Justice and Education at Connecticut Voices for Children, said that in Connecticut, 13 percent of students are black and about 24 percent are Hispanic. With enrollment in advanced placement courses and gifted programs, there is a giant deficit, with only 7 percent and 11 percent, respectively. Arts education is similar, because 52 percent of students in minority-majority school districts are not enrolled in any art class at all.

"Education, very clearly, provides people with access to upward mobility," Hudson said, adding that King also saw education as a way of making people aware of the world around them, but that only a certain portion of schools adequately prepare children.

"Certain people - often white, often upper-middle class, often rich - are prepared to fight systems and question the world around them," Hudson said. "Many, many more people - often brown, often poor - are left feeling the impacts of oppression more severely, without ever having the tools and the skills to be able to fully defend themselves against things like predatory payday lenders and politicians who are willing and able to lie to them, without their ability to question what they're being told."

Hudson said that in Connecticut, there is a more than \$10,000 per-pupil gap in funding between the richest and poorest public school districts, and that while that is not the source of all inadequacies, there is still an effect.

"It does impact what classes they offer, what supports that those children receive, and the richness of the education that those children are able to get," Hudson said. "Understanding the legacy of education choices that were made in Connecticut, often on behalf of you and your children, is essential that you are able to push back on legislation when it pushes children further and further away from the educational experiences that would prepare them to be critical participants of a world that increasingly demands that you think for yourself, and speak truth to power."