

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Celebration

Introductory Comments

January 22, 2008

It is my great honor and pleasure to welcome you to this wonderful celebration of the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I am especially pleased to welcome our special guest, Bernice Albertine King, second daughter and youngest child of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Coretta Scott King.

Bernice, I am proud to tell you that in March of 1965, my oldest brother traveled to Selma, Alabama to rally with your father, and in March of 1967 all three of my siblings rallied with your father and Dick Gregory in Chicago, Illinois. I was too young to attend but was heavily influenced by the participation of my family in the Civil Rights movement.

For me, this day is an opportunity to celebrate our diversity and multiculturalism, and to reaffirm our commitment to respect all members of our community regardless of race, color, creed, religion, gender, national origin, age, political affiliation, sexual orientation or disabling condition. In Dr. King's famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail", he spoke of the once powerful role of the church as not merely "...a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion...", but rather "...a thermostat that transformed the mores of society." I ask that each of us act as a thermostat – rather than a thermometer – to enhance the diversity and multicultural life of our campus and to insure that all members of our community feel welcomed and supported. Let me provide a few examples for how you can contribute to a positive environment on our campus:

- Make a conscience effort to learn something about African-American and other racial/ethnic cultures, perhaps by taking a course through the African American Studies Program, or a course in Judaism or Islam through the Religious Studies Department;
- Reach out to an international student, to make that person feel more welcome on our campus, and to learn something about his or her country; consider registering for the Global Leadership Program in the International Programs Center;
- Advocate for the rights of members of our community who are gay to enjoy the civil rights afforded all Americans;
- Offer a helping hand to someone who has a disabling condition and is challenged by some aspect of the physical landscape of our campus;
- Learn the meaning of religious observances other than your own, such as Ramadan, Yom Kippur, Good Friday, and others;
- Attend a lecture, film, or conference through the Women's and Gender Studies Program, to explore the role that gender plays in our society;
- Embrace the mission of the Office of Multicultural Affairs – to promote the appreciation of cultural diversity and to foster intercultural and cross-cultural understanding, and
- Visit the Multicultural Resource Center, and experience the many programs and activities offered by the center, such as the Shades of Color Conference February 2nd here in the Elliott University Center.

By adopting one or more of these approaches you can serve as a catalyst for a positive dialogue on diversity and reinforce the value and appreciation of multiculturalism on our campus.

This evening we celebrate the life of a man who alone has a nationally recognized birthday with two presidents – Washington, the “father” and Lincoln, the “savior” of the Republic – respectively, and who shares the Nobel Peace Prize with world leaders like Nelson Mandela and Bishop Tutu. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was both the moral catalyst and compass when we finally faced the legacy of what some have called America’s original sin. He is the greatest moral voice of his time and arguably the greatest in our nation’s history. It is for these reasons that each year we celebrate the birth of this great American and reflect on his enduring contributions to our understanding of every person’s basic humanity.

Please enjoy this evening’s program. Thank you.