

From ending structural racism to strengthening voting rights, MLK Day breakfast presenters say work continues to realize King's 'dream'

Craig S. Semon | Telegram & Gazette

WORCESTER — Although it was a virtual event and its speakers were at various locations, Quinsigamond Community College's 37th annual Martin Luther King Jr. Community Breakfast was connected by the spirit, the spirituality and the legacy of the legendary American civil rights leader.

The event was livestreamed Monday morning on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, which commemorates the birth of the U.S. civil rights leader born in 1929.

Dr. Kellie Carter Jackson, an associate professor in Africana Studies at Wellesley College and author of "Force & Freedom: Black Abolitionists and the Politics of Violence," presented the breakfast's keynote address.

Jackson gave a 30-minute lecture examining the true history and embellished memory on King, while examining, as well as demystifying, his legacy.

Jackson also went over the major successes and failures of the civil rights movement, with one of the biggest failures being "the failure of white responsibility, the failure for white people to take up the burden, as well as to make sure that these changes were impacted for all."

Jackson added that people were unwilling to relinquish the power and the privilege that allowed them to benefit and see advantages in the institution of structured racism.

"When I think about the backlash that happened at the end of King's life, I think about the fact that he was not well liked. He polled extremely low in the

numbers. He's not the King that we all love and celebrate today. He was considered a nuisance, a trouble-maker, someone who got what he deserved," Jackson said. "But, King said something that still sits with me today and that is that 'negroes most troublesome adversary was not the KKK, but white liberals who were more devoted to order than justice'...Think about it."

'Diversity makes city stronger'

In honoring King's inherent message, Mayor Joseph M. Petty acknowledged the welcome diversity of Worcester.

"I've been on the council since 1998. If you told me than that our council's school committee would be so diverse as it is today, I would have found it hard to imagine. It would have been hard to imagine that we have refugees and immigrants, this many people of color in elected office...And this progress continues with the first nonbinary elected official in the history of the Commonwealth," Petty said. "This diversity makes our city stronger. The more voices that are included, the more voices that are heard, our city becomes more equitable, more just, more resilient."

While much progress has been made, Lt. Gov. Karyn Polito said much of King's vision remains unfulfilled.

"The past two years has underscored the structural challenges that communities of color experience every day," Polito said. "As a result, our administration has continued to keep the focus on equality, as we responded to the pandemic and moved Massachusetts forward."

Polito also highlighted the commonwealth's COVID-19 vaccine equity initiative that invested well over \$40 million to promote access to vaccines in communities of color, and how the Baker-Polito administration has invested federal resources, including advocating for a proposal to invest nearly \$1 billion in funding housing priorities with a focus on home ownership for families of color.

Struggle continues

In their remarks, U.S. Rep. Joseph P. McGovern, and QCC President Luis G. Pedraja also said King's work is far from over.

“The old fights are new again and we must rise to the occasion and meet this moment with the courage, perseverance and the strength of those who rallied behind Dr. King and marched with him towards that Promised Land,” McGovern said. “Voting rights are under attack because the people in power are working to undermine the power of the people. But they're also under attack because too many people are OK with sitting on the sidelines.

“They're OK with inequality and injustice because it doesn't impact them directly...But the reality is that none of us are free unless all of us are free. We cannot sit on the sidelines. The future is in our hands and we need to honor Dr. King's legacy with not just words, not just gatherings like this, but with action.”

Pedraja added that King's "dream" has yet to be fulfilled.

“There was a time not so long ago that some would say that our struggle was over, that we lived in a post-racial America, that ‘The Dream’ had been fulfilled. But we know better. Recent events have made it even more clear that the struggle continues, that ‘The Dream’ is still unfulfilled,” Pedraja said. “We cannot sit quietly in the dark. We must stand up and we must take action. We must be counted. We must lift our voices. But we must not only resist. We must prevail.”

Cavaioli receives honor

Also at the breakfast, Linda Cavaioli, former executive director of YWCA of Central Massachusetts, was awarded the annual Eleanor Hawley Community Service.

Philip J. Niddrie, co-chair of the community breakfast and former special projects coordinator for the City Manager's Office, served as the event's master of ceremony.

Rev. Dr. Ronald S. Smith of the Second Baptist Church gave the invocation and benediction.

Worcester Police Officer Thomas Hurley, soloist Sharon Henderson, vice president of the Central Council on Aging, and the New England Gospel Choir performing musical selections during the program were both taped during a previous, pre-COVID breakfast.

As part of the outreach from the breakfast, the United Way of Central Massachusetts, the Worcester Area Mission Society and United Congregational Church said they are collecting new books for second and third grade students in Worcester Public Schools.

For a video replay of the event, go to [QCC.edu/mlkbreakfast](https://qcc.edu/mlkbreakfast).