

Rollins, McGovern speak at MLK Worcester's annual community breakfast

Stefan Revenboer | January 16, 2023

WORCESTER — The city on Monday hosted its 38th annual Martin Luther King Jr. Community Breakfast in person for the first time since 2020, with several speakers saying the country's current racial divides are adding heightened urgency to the ongoing struggle for civil rights.

"Unfortunately, the pandemic has exposed ... (the) fractures of our society," Luis G. Pedraja, president of Quinsigamond Community College, told the hundreds who gathered for the event at the college. "We have seen more clearly than ever that racism and systemic oppression still grip our society.

"We still see that violence plagues us and that hate still thrives in our midst, as is particularly evident in the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and so many, many others."

Worcester Police Officer James Soto, Sr. sits with his daughter Virginia, 3, at the Martin Luther King, Jr. community breakfast at Quinsigamond Community College Monday.

Pedraja summarized the actions the college has taken regarding justice over the past several years and was one of several speakers who emphasized the importance of honoring King's legacy through action.

Also read: [Holyoke's MLK Breakfast returns with a message: "Don't be ashamed of who you are."](#)

"Our job isn't just to hang a Black Lives Matter flag in our window or post on social media about how bad racism is or how we all attended that breakfast," said US Rep. James P. McGovern, D-Worcester. "We must disrupt racism in our individual choices, in our economic choices, and especially in our political choices."

McGovern said leaders “need to be anti-racist: live our lives intentionally and courageously, and support strategies that combat racism and ideas that promote equity, equity, inclusion and diversity.”

He added that eradicating or avoiding individual prejudice is not enough.

“The truth is that racism is about power and politics, and even if I don’t hold racist views as a white person, I’m part of a system that has been helping certain people and hurting other people because of the color of their skin for decades,” McGovern said.

Rollins delivers keynote address

The event’s keynote speaker, US Attorney for Massachusetts Rachael S. Rollins, noted that the organization she works for, the Department of Justice (DOJ), was formed in the 1870s to organize racist groups like the Ku Klux Klan after the fight civil war.

The story goes on

Rollins said working to protect civil rights is an important part of her job, listing it as a top priority alongside two other issues — protecting against violent crime and tackling the opioid crisis.

WORCESTER — U.S. Attorney MA Rachael Rollins speaks during the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Breakfast at Quinsigamond Community College.

Rollins’ office, along with the Department of Justice’s Civil Rights Division in Washington, DC, is currently conducting a civil “model-or-practice” investigation into the Worcester Police Department.

The DOJ said in November it had found “significant grounds” to investigate whether Worcester police routinely use excessive force or discriminate on the basis of race or gender.

Speaking Monday in a room attended by many city officials, including Police Commissioner Steven M. Sargent, Rollins emphasized the importance of working together to fight injustice and praised Sargent, whom she hugged after her speech.

“I’ll be honest — sometimes it’s very difficult to hold law enforcement accountable while we work with them every day to protect our neighborhoods,” Rollins said. “But what makes this

job easier is people like Chief Sargent and command staff and officers here who are committed to doing the right thing (and) learning to do it better.”

Rollins added that Sargent and others know that the behavior of a “chosen few” makes it harder to build trust and serve the community, and that “they don’t reflect the overwhelming majority of men and women in law enforcement who live their lives.” risking a day for us.”

Rollins said she is in contact with Sargent about violence in Worcester, referring to a recent Harlem Street shooting that injured a toddler.

Chief Sargent declined a request for comment after Monday’s event, saying he did not have time to speak.

Sargent presents department service awards

Also on Monday, Sargent bestowed two officers with ones after former Black WPD Lt. Loman Rutherford named department service award: Capt. Kenneth Davenport, the first black officer in town to be made captain, and Officer David Rutherford, younger brother of the late Lieutenant Rutherford.

“People like Loman don’t come along every day,” Rutherford said as he thanked Sargent for the award and spoke of his brother’s accomplishments. “He’s one in a million. One in a billion.”

Worcester Police Department Service Medal recipient Officer David Rutherford speaks during the Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Breakfast at Quinsigamond Community College Monday.

Sargent also praised Loman Rutherford before presenting the awards, calling him “one of the finest officers I’ve ever met.”

Rollins was the only speaker Monday to allude to the pattern-or-practice probe.

Other speakers included City Manager Eric D. Batista, who noted that the city had shown an “unflagging commitment to serving its most vulnerable members” but also said it could not rest on its laurels.

“One of my top priorities is to create a more inclusive and representative workforce,” Batista said — a future where “diverse youth will find themselves in leadership positions, in

business, in the arts, in healthcare and in every industry and sector in the city.” see better represented.”

Batista, the city’s first Latino executive, took office the same day Rollins’ investigation into the police was announced, and found a “racially toxic” culture during a city hall inspection ordered by his predecessor.

Batista – who made no direct reference to the exam or the police investigation in his brief remarks – ended by quoting King.

“DR. King said: “History has proven that social systems have great last-minute breathing power, and the guardians of the status quo are always on hand with an oxygen tank that tends to keep the old order alive.”

Batista added, “I know we have the ability to challenge the status quo and embrace the lived experiences of our BIPOC [Black, Indigenous and people of color] community and work together to make Worcester a vibrant and thriving city for all.”

In addition to speeches, there were numerous awards and grants at Monday’s event.

The annual Eleanor T. Hawley Community Service Award was presented to George Storms Smith — an MLK breakfast founder with a decade-long career in education and civil rights activism — and Gordon Hargrove, the city’s prolific volunteer who has worked at The Friendly House for more than six decades.

The segment that seemed to garner the most enthusiastic applause Monday was an impressive musical father-son duet by Noah and David Allen, parishioners at The Journey Community Church in Worcester.

The Allens received a standing ovation after a performance that saw more than a few people in the crowd dab at each other.

Noah Allen, who played trumpet like his father, will attend Berklee College of Music on a full scholarship.

This article originally appeared on Telegram & Gazette: Rollins, McGovern speak at annual MLK breakfast