



Dr. King Brings Out Best In Queens

by Matt Hampton, Assistant Editor

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The people of southeast Queens found a variety of ways to make the most of Martin Luther King Jr. Day in the borough, adopting the philosophy that it was not a holiday, but an opportunity to celebrate King's life by doing great things in his name.

At the Sojourner Truth AME Zion Church in St. Albans, a small gathering of community members and students from all over the city came to participate in a neighborhood cleanup as well as a food and coat drive to help underprivileged residents of the borough.

"Young people are just as important as anybody in the world today," the Rev. James Artis said, addressing a handful of youth and congregants gathered in his church. "You can change things."

The students, who came to the tiny church from as far away as Harlem, wore powder blue T-shirts with an image of King and the words "Be the Change" emblazoned across their front. They were organized by the group Service for Peace.

Artis, who marched with King at the Washington Monument in 1963, had received a City Council proclamation — sponsored by the offices of Council Members Leroy Comrie and John Liu — for the church's work in service to the community earlier in the proceedings.

"This is not a holiday that we'll sit back and take it easy and have a day off," Artis said. "This is a day we'll enjoy honoring a great man."

From there, the students and worshippers split into two groups, with one participating in a street cleanup and the other visiting the St. Albans Veterans Affairs Hospital to read and sing songs to patients.

Melissa Crooks, of South Jamaica, said she found the event surfing the Web, and participated because she wanted to spend the day giving back to her community.

"When I was younger, I never did anything for MLK Day," she said. "I wanted to come out and volunteer, to see how today's youth see things."

Students Dawn Reeves and Cheyenne Dinkins, who read a poem to the assembled veterans, said that just the act of visiting the hospital was uplifting for the patients there.

“It’s just nice to help, because nobody comes around,” Reeves said. “Even if we’re just here, it makes them feel better.”

In the past, she has visited the hospital with her grandmother and younger sister, and said that just seeing younger people in the building makes the patients’ eyes light up.

At St. Luke’s Baptist Church in Laurelton, community leaders and citizens remembered King in a different way, hosting a panel discussion about King’s dream, and whether it was still alive and at work in the world.

The discussion was hosted by the Tri-Community Youth Council.

Children and adults packed the gathering room in the basement of the school that adjoins St. Luke’s, and gave their rapt attention to a video on King’s life and work before engaging in a discussion with community leaders.

The theme, not surprisingly, was the role of youth in keeping his work alive.

“Today we don’t have children galvanized by any particular interest of purpose,” said Michael Bastion, pastor of St. Luke’s. “Youth were an integral part of (King’s) movement.”

Ralph Greer, a community activist who owns a computer education facility, said that family life in many local neighborhoods has declined, a sentiment that was also voiced by Lance and Todd Feurtado, of the King of Kings Foundation.

“We saw our neighborhoods go from residential neighborhoods in which each home had a mother and father, turn into something real ugly,” Lance Feurtado said. “We’re here to break that chain of destruction.”