

# **Leaders, community members reflect on King's powerful message at NAACP's annual MLK program**

by Dan Brannan, Content Director  
January 18 2016 11:50 AM





**ALTON** - Area leaders and residents joined hands on Sunday for the annual Martin Luther King Program of the Alton branch of the NAACP at Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church.

St. Louis Journalist and community leader Reginald Riddle-Young served as keynote speaker for the event.

**Alton NAACP president James Gray and Elder Roosevelt Reed of Oakwood Church of God in Christ** were honored with awards. Gray received the humanitarian award for 26 years of service as president of the local NAACP, Reed was honored with the Martin Luther King Award, given annually.

Today there will be a walk to the Lovejoy Statue in Alton with residents and leaders again showing unity, Gray said.

Gray said he thought it was an outstanding program on Sunday recognizing Dr. King's birthday and his importance to our society today.

"Dr. King made a difference for all of us," Gray said. "He made a change in society for the better. I admired Dr. King a lot and have tried to live my life out in his way."

The NAACP leader said as usual there was an extraordinary turnout at the MLK gathering in Alton and everyone seemed to have "a great time and enjoyed themselves."

Gray said he is considering retiring after this year as president of the Alton NAACP organization. He said he has served in that role for 20 more years than any of his predecessors.

Looking back, Gray said he is proud of many of his accomplishments from establishing the NAACP King recognition, the annual trip to Memphis for youngsters from the area

to see the National Civil Rights Museum, to the Back To School, Stay In School Program with sponsorship from Simmons Hanly Conroy law firm, which offers 1,000 backpacks to students annually.

Other things Gray mentioned he is proud of are the Christmas shopping spree and the annual NAACP shoe program he leads in the holiday season, along with the scholarship program sponsored by the organization. He said more than 80 youth have received scholarship money thanks to the NAACP over all the years.

Through Gray's lobbying, the City of Alton enacted MLK's birthday as a city holiday after a deciding vote by then Mayor Bob Towse. Gray said he knows that decision by Towse and the other aldermen at the time has meant a lot to city employees through the years to have King's birthday as a paid holiday.

The recent shooting of Romell L. Jones has bothered Gray and the other members of the Alton branch of the NAACP. Gray has led a fund-raising drive through the NAACP to assist with Romell's funeral and said he plans to deliver at least \$500 on behalf of the organization to help with the youngster's funeral. Jones, 11, was shot on Monday, Jan. 11, as he waited for a ride to basketball practice.

The NAACP leader said the actions in the drive-by shooting of Romell Jones should have never happened and work needs to be done to correct these senseless killings across the country.

"These young men being murdered also in Chicago and St. Louis and across the country has to stop," he said. "This does not coincide at all with Dr. King's peaceful message. There is still a lot of work left to do."