

Dreaming, Doing, and Waking Up: An Altonian take on observing the legacy of Dr. King

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - Today is the observance of the birthday of slain civil rights activist Martin Luther King, Jr, and, while his legacy lives and breathes today, it is interpreted differently.

Riverbender.com reached out to several Altonians under the age of 50 (who were never able to personally hear Dr. King's message or experience the climate behind his words) to see how Dr. King is being remembered in the city. Five local community leaders and activists responded, and each admitted they were inspired by his legacy in some fashion. These are their responses to the question, "how are you observing Martin Luther King Day?" They are presented in order of their responses.



Joshua Young

"Today, I'm seeing it as a dream deferred," Joshua Young stated. "We are not yet equal, there is no equality. I am awake. I am no longer in the social dream state. I am awake."

Young, who ran for Mayor of Alton in 2017 and serves as a Democratic Precinct Committeeman, said he would spend the day in a sort of anti-observance in which he would meditate on King as a "full character," instead of purely remembering the message of the famous dream speech.

"I'm going to celebrate Dr. King as a completion of his character," Young said. "In his 'Knock at Midnight' speech, which is not as well-known as the 'I Have a Dream Speech.' In that speech, he goes into the cause of black supremacy, which he said was just as bad as white supremacy."

Part of the completion of King's character, Young said, is knowing the conditions behind the need for the civil rights movement, including the 1895 Atlanta Compromise, which was an agreement minted in 1895 between Tuskegee Institute President Booker T. Washington, other black leaders and southern white leaders in which it was agreed southern black people would submit to white political rule in exchange for basic education and due process under the law.

A portion of that compromise states black people could not "agitate for equality, integration or justice" and white people from the north would fund black educational charities.

"I stand still on the side that gave Martin Luther King his dream," Young said. "We as African Americans still don't have that value in America. I am no longer accepting traditions given to me by ancestral slave masters. I traced my lineage to Cameroon and the Congo, and I hope to bring more of that about this year."

Institutional racism is another cause against which Young fights. He said the election of current U.S. President Donald Trump, and his recent remarks regarding African nations shows a complete colonial attitude toward the lands of Young's ancestors.

"I understand it's one day our country can give to one significant African American of 365 days," he said. "It is not good enough, and it does not honor my cultural value. I look at Dr. King's totality as a progressive, which he moved into after the Civil Rights Act was passed - just before he was assassinated. I think America is keeping us dreaming as African Americans, and I'm celebrating Martin Luther King by waking up."



Peter Hough

Reverend Peter Hough of the Alton Mission has been inspired throughout his ministry by Dr. King, and said he observed his role model's birthday Sunday through fellowship and reconciliation. He said his congregation celebrated and worshiped with Unity Fellowship Church of Godfrey for the third time in the last six months or so.

"I met with Charles Burton of Unity Fellowship," Hough said. "We've been friends for a couple years, and we decided to do the first worship together over the fall, just after Charlottesville."

Hough said Burton offered to come to Alton to worship with the Alton Mission congregation, but Hough insisted that he go to Godfrey with his congregation.

"As a first step, we had our churches meet together for worship," Hough said. "We went over to them in the fall, which we thought was important. After Charlottesville, racial reconciliation became important to white church leaders, who wanted to host a conference or a meeting on their grounds, but the work of racial equality never gets to stop for people of color. We didn't want to control it in our own space and just invite them into the process."

In November, however, Burton and his congregation did accept Hough's invitation to worship together with the Alton Mission on their home turf. For the observance of Dr. King's holiday, however, Hough and his congregation returned to Godfrey.

"We worshiped over there, and had a meal over there," Hough said.

Hough said he also discussed something on which Burton worked with the United Congregations of the Metro East called "Dinner for Eight," in which mixed-race pairings of people invited each other into their homes for four dinners.

During those meals, Hough said discussion points about race were encouraged. He said the first meal or two would be standard getting to know each other and finding what they had in common, but by meal number four, the questions would come from a more vulnerable place.

"We wanted them to be comfortable enough to ask each other questions like, 'what work do we have left to do?', 'what are the things I need to hear, that we don't even know to ask about?', 'what do we do now?' and then plot a course to figure it out," he said.



Jason Harrison

Jason Harrison described himself as a community member who serves on many good groups. He has always cited Dr. King as a role model for his community service, and said he was spending Monday passing those valuable lessons down to his children.

"Today, my children and I will watch small clips of Dr. King speech on YouTube," he said Monday afternoon. "In addition, we will discuss their future endeavors in public service. Then I will explain to them the struggles we have faced as people, and how, through our love, perseverance, help from others, prayers, songs and, most importantly, God, carried us through."

The message of love and peace Dr. King brought was powerful, Harrison said. He said, like King, he must strive to keep others in his heart as well as his actions.

"What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic," Harrison said. "Power at its best is love implementing the demand of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love."



Marcus Harrison

Jason Harrison's brother, Marcus Harrison, said the day is an ignition of civil duty and action instead of simply being a holiday. He said, by reexamining the life of Dr. King, he can find ways to see the needs of others in perspective.

"Dr. King was a great civil rights icon, not for pretentious gain, but merely for the love of mankind," he said. "Today, I challenge myself to move beyond the borders of selfishness or the slothfulness masquerade of comfort, and accept my responsibility of 'The Dream,' and rise to the cause; aiding fellow mankind regardless of color or creed; strengthen my community with gifts talents and resources, and stand and be the voice for those of any injustice.

"As I sit, reflecting and lamenting on the martyred lives, whom we live vicariously, I can't allow the dream to die! There were many who served alongside Dr. King. Perhaps they weren't mentioned, or even went unnoticed, but popularity or notoriety wasn't their motive, but we were!

"Everyone has a voice and a light. Let's use it against the vast field of darkness. I echo the words of MLK: 'Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere!' While it is someone else today, it may be you tomorrow. Together, with your help, we shall overcome!"



Sara McGibany

Alton Main Street Executive Director Sara McGibany is known throughout the community for both her service, and her ability to inspire service in others. She said the legacy of Dr. King continues to serve as an ongoing inspiration for her service and her drive to celebrate Alton's diversity and culture.

"Dr. King's work in social justice, equality and racial harmony is a huge source of inspiration for me," McGibany said. "Today, we had our first meeting of Alton's 'Small Town, Big World' cultural celebration, and we are looking to have Alton's Black History

be a big component of the event this year. I strongly encourage anyone who is interested in sharing about their heritage to reach out to the Alton Main Street office, everyone is welcome to be a part, and share elements of their culture with the community."