

At MLK commemoration in Coachella, many say civil rights leader's work timely even today



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Palm Springs Desert Sun

Published 3:38 p.m. PT Jan. 16, 2022



As lawyer Anyse Smith was researching Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his work for a speech she was to deliver at a commemoration Sunday at the Coachella Library, she was struck by how relevant the civil rights leader's work remains in today's social and political climate.

King delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech 59 years ago, at the 1963 March on Washington. He was slain five years later. Now, in 2022, [voting rights legislation is again a contentious topic in Congress](#).

"The Civil Rights Movement really carried us through for many years. But right now, I think that we're in another time where we need to stand up once again for rights that are being abridged: voting rights," said Smith, a resident of Palm Desert. "I think that his principles and the steps, particularly of nonviolent direct action, are just as applicable now as they were back then."

The celebration Sunday, held by the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Commemoration Committee ahead of Monday's federal holiday in honor of King, marked the return of the in-person event after last year's celebration went virtual due to COVID-19.

As she delivered her speech at the outdoor ceremony to about 100 attendees, Smith stressed that love is the foundation both of nonviolent practices for social change and what King aspired to — [what he called a "beloved community."](#) In such a place, he said, poverty, hunger and homelessness would not be tolerated; racism and all forms of discrimination would be replaced by inclusivity; and disputes would be resolved by peaceful means.



Sharon McKee performs during a commemorative event to celebrate the accomplishments of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Coachella, Calif., on Sunday, Jan. 16, 2022. Taya Gray/The Desert Sun

While Coachella was the host city this year, the theme of Sunday's program, "Bridging the Communities of the Coachella Valley," could be felt through speakers and entertainment.

Representatives from various valley cities read proclamations. Singer Keisha D performed, along with Sol de mi Tierra Ballet Folklórico, and Norman and Sharon McKee on African Drums. A blessing by Danza Azteca Citlaltonac also kicked off celebrations.

There was a strong youth presence at the celebration, both among audience members and those who took the stage. Girl Scout Troop 490 said the Pledge of Allegiance, while young children danced the ballet folklórico.

Taylor Franz, 12, of Cathedral City, said he learned about King's work by watching speeches and videos in school. He said it's necessary to celebrate the civil rights leader because "his words were important."

Jarvis Crawford, chairman of the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Commemoration Committee, said it's important to involve young people in the annual celebration so that they can continue to learn about the civil rights movement in American history.



People gather to celebrate the accomplishments of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Coachella, Calif., on Sunday, Jan. 16, 2022. Taya Gray/The Desert Sun

Some people want to keep topics like racism out of school curriculum, he noted, referencing [Texas lawmakers who passed a bill aimed at banning critical race theory in schools](#). The [bill states](#) "a teacher may not be compelled to discuss a particular current event or widely debated and currently controversial issue of public policy or social affairs."

Crawford believes keeping issues such as race away from young people is "detrimental."

"History is history, whether it was good or bad, if it was negative or positive," Crawford said. "If you don't know where we've come, you won't know how far you need to go."

While there has been plenty of change since King delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech on Aug. 28, 1963, more needs to be done, Crawford said. Locally, more diverse representation in political offices across the valley is a top priority.

"In the Coachella and Indio areas, you'll see a big number of Latinos in office, but that's because of population. When you go to Palm Springs, you don't see too many minorities or African Americans in politics, and the population there is just as big with Latinos," he said.

"In our school districts, the school board members throughout our valley (don't) reflect the actual population of people that are here in these areas," he added, "With teachers in schools you don't see that."

With Monday officially designated as the federal holiday to remember King, Crawford encouraged people to take action and better their communities. In years past, the chairman said his family has given out blankets to homeless individuals or helped prepare meals for those in need.

Smith said that even doing research or watching a film, such as "Selma," to learn why a federal holiday recognizes his work is another way to remember King's legacy.

"I hope that we continue to keep his memory and legacy alive, that we continue to delve deeper than just the soundbites that we hear and actually find out about the man himself and really what he stood for," Smith said.

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