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King Day Generates Celebrations, Discussions

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January 19, 2004, 8:37 PM EST

Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy has been clear to Christine Hoyte of Freeport ever since 1968, the year he was assassinated.

That year, Hoyte, then a young teacher, became the first black employee at Waverly Park School in Lynbrook -- thanks to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which was founded three years earlier. "I was amazed," said Hoyte, now 62, at a parade Monday in Hempstead honoring King. "They had never hired a black person, not even a maintenance worker."

Now retired, Hoyte brought her 13-year-old daughter Kristina to the Hempstead event for the same reason many others around the Island marked the holiday honoring the slain civil rights leader's birthday: to pay tribute his achievements, and to remind people of how far they have come -- and of the work that lies ahead.

Amid much music, dancing, poetry and speeches, programs in Copiague and Central Islip reiterated the message. King's vision of what blacks need to do to move ahead today is falling short, said Cecile Forte, a retired dean at Suffolk County Community College and a member of the Brookhaven town planning board. A keynote speaker at Hope Missionary Baptist Church in Central Islip, Forte said that while "we have become governors, senators and mayors," many leaders are not reaching back to pull others forward.

Forte also said that black parents need to take charge of their children's education and upbringing. "We must discipline our children," she said, "teach them responsibility and persistence."

In Hempstead, the Rev. Robert Bullock of Faith Baptist Church Cathedral said that young people need to be reminded not to take things such as voting rights for granted. Carrying a purple banner at th parade in the town with his two sons, Malachi, 5, and Anthony, 14, Bullock remembered how his parents used to pack food for family visits to North Carolina in case restaurants on the drive south refused to accept black customers. He spoke of segregated bathrooms, and places where his parents felt it wasn't safe for them to stop at all. "It created fear," he said.

At the Bethel AME Church in Copiague, a full house greeted guest speaker Sen. Hillary

Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) with a standing ovation. She recalled how a trip she made as a teen to hear King speak in Chicago left a lasting impression. "He called upon us to be a part of the change that was coming," she said, "to stay awake and push toward that promised land of integration and hope."

Another theme of discussion at the Hempstead parade Monday was President George W. Bush's visit last week to King's grave in Atlanta amid a crowd of protesters. Ricky Blakely, 41, of Baldwin, said he thought the protesters contradicted King's message of inclusion and cooperation.

Stencil Stokes, 61, who rode with the Howard Beach-based Federation of Black Cowboys in the Hempstead parade, disagreed, saying that he thought Bush's visit to King's grave was an insincere public relations stunt, especially given the government's limits on civil rights after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. And Kristopher Scott, 27, an engineer from Hempstead, said that while he agreed with those who protested Bush's visit, he also thinks that heightened security measures after Sept. 11 helped carry King's legacy because they were intended to stop further violence.

Some young people, such as 13-year-old Kristina Hoyte, felt less of a need to participate in any formal ceremony honoring King.. She said that some of her friends planned to spend their day off from school sleeping or shopping, although they do appreciate what King did for black people, even if "kids aren't really hyped about it, as far as going out to parades."

But others, including teenagers from the Westbury High School Navy ROTC, whose color and sword guards marched in the parade, seemed to have their own firm visions. Eva Torres, 17, of Old Westbury, said she wants to help expand the right of immigrants to work in the U.S., citing the experience of her grandparents, Mexican immigrants who experienced discrimination years ago when they moved to Carle Place.

While Torres and other students said they felt they had better access to education than did their parents and grandparents, adults at the parade and at the meeting at Bethel AME said much more headway is needed. Rep. Steve Israel (D-Huntington) said at the Copiague program that "our schools are just as segregated today as they were in his day," referring to King. "Our schools are still woefully behind on hiring teachers of color," Israel said. "That's wrong."

Staff writer Collin Nash contributed to this story.

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