

Dakota hosts MLK Day celebration

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By Thomas Franz 



Dakota High School student Lorenzo Santiago, center, performs with the school's a cappella group, "The Unaccompanied Minors," during the 30th annual ICRJ Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday Celebration of Macomb County at Dakota Jan. 16. (Photo by Sean Work)

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Pictured is Stevenson High School junior Madalyn Czarski's entry in the 2017 MLK High School Art Contest. (Photo by Sean Work)

MACOMB TOWNSHIP — More than 600 people attended the 30th annual Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday Celebration of Macomb County, hosted by the Interfaith Center for Racial Justice.

Government, school, cultural and religious leaders from throughout the county visited Dakota High School for the Jan. 16 event that shared a common message of continuing the hard work necessary to create justice for all.

"It's once again time to recommit ourselves, to keep on fighting not with our fists, but with our faith, to face change and never give up hope," said U.S. Senator Debbie Stabenow during her introductory remarks at the event.

In addition to Stabenow, the event featured speeches from Carol Sullivan, the new executive director of the ICRJ, and Jocelyn Benson, CEO of the Ross Initiative in Sports for Equality. Benson is also a former dean of the Wayne State University Law School.

Sullivan, who joined the ICRJ in July, said she hopes for people to look beyond MLK Day events and take the message of the day into everyday life.

“I think there’s a tendency for people to gather and think that this is their obligation, then we don’t see people until the following year,” Sullivan said. “I think the time is calling us to move beyond the event. This day is every year at the same time, and we have to put the work in.”

Since joining the IRCJ, Sullivan said her experiences have shown her that there remains much work to do for racial equality.

“We have not come as far as we think we have. There’s a lot of work for organizations like ours. We all know that, but we need to do this as a collaborative effort. It’s going to take more than ICRJ to make a difference. We can make a difference, but we need others to help us make that difference,” Sullivan said.

Benson focused much of her speech on legal and political issues that have affected voting rights recently. Due to those legal decisions, Benson also spoke on work needed to create reform for redistricting and campaign finance.

“This is a time to reflect on what’s come before us and the work we still have ahead of us to create that more just world and stand up against injustice,” Benson said. “This is a day that reminds us of what we should be doing everyday and not just one day of the year, reflecting on the work to seek justice and doing what we can to continue to seek justice in the future.”

The event also recognized several students who completed projects that recognized King’s work during the Civil Rights era.

Austin McDonald and Meredith Tipton, winners of an oratory contest, performed their “A Sense of Justice,” speech. McDonald and Tipton are sixth graders from Bruce Collins Middle School in Sterling Heights.

Madeline Czarski, a junior from Stevenson High School, was awarded first place in an art contest for her illustration that displayed a figure with the American flag draped over his head helping an African American figure off the ground and freeing him from his chains. Czarski’s piece will be displayed in the Charles H. Wright Museum in Detroit.

With such a focus on students during the event, Dakota Principal Paul Sibley also reflected on what the event means for students like his today.

“The event was perfect for the current climate. It gives people a chance to take a step back and realize there’s a lot more that needs to be done,” Sibley said. “We have to stop pretending that we’re not different. We need to start embracing each other’s differences and learn about each other.”

“We joke about it at times, but these kids teach us so much,” Sibley said. “They’re so accepting of one another, of their differences, and I think every day as adults in this building we learn from them.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Staff Writer Thomas Franz covers Macomb Township, Chippewa Valley Schools and the Macomb County Board of Commissioners for the Macomb Township Chronicle. He also covers sports primarily for the Shelby-Utica News. He has worked for C & G Newspapers since 2013 and attended Michigan State University.
