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Roanoke felt King legacy

On Martin Luther King Jr. Day, 250 people marched through historic Gainsboro to honor his memory and rededicate themselves to carrying on his life's work.



Photos by Jeanna Juerscherl | The Roanoke Times

Isaiah Craig, 14, marches Monday from the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Bridge to First Baptist Church on Jefferson Street Northwest.

By [Mason Adams](#)
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Roanoke is not listed among the famed stops that Martin Luther King Jr. made during the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

But his legacy was and is felt, nonetheless. His work in that decade informed efforts in Roanoke, where an unofficial biracial committee worked to quietly integrate city businesses, starting with lunch counters and moving on through movie theaters and other public spaces.

King's work is reflected in art - both in the physical form of a statue that stands at the end of historic Henry Street, and in a haunting print by an artist who relocated to Roanoke County and was so touched by the televised image of a handcuffed King that he reproduced it.

And, perhaps more strongly than anywhere else, King's legacy is felt by those Roanokers who lived through institutionalized segregation and who want a better life for their children.

All of those were represented Monday as 250 people marched through historic Gainsboro to honor King's memory and rededicate themselves to carrying on his life's work.

Led by marching bands and elected officials locking arms, the crowd started at the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Bridge before heading up Henry Street and then Wells Avenue, singing "We Shall Overcome" along the way. Children carried signs that read "Stop Discrimination: Fight for Justice for All," "Respect Love & World Peace," "We Love Our Educators: Education is the Key to Success" and other slogans.

The group then filed into First Baptist Church on Jefferson Street Northwest for a ceremony sponsored by the Roanoke chapter of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The Roanoke branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was represented as well.

There, William Fleming High School student Ollie "Tiger" Howie read the well-known "I Have a Dream" speech, in which King used America's founding principles and key biblical passages to make his argument for civil rights. As Howie worked his way through King's phrases, the congregation responded, murmuring their assent before applauding him at the end.

Mac McCadden, who served as the master of ceremonies, said, "There's hope for our young folks, don't you think?"

During the keynote address, N.L. Bishop, president of Jefferson College of Health Sciences, challenged those in attendance not to just reflect on King's life, but also to go out and act. He advised not to contribute to what King called "the appalling silence of the good people."

He encouraged the youth at the ceremony to excel in science classes and pursue careers in the health care field.

He also issued a broader challenge: "I want to say to the young people who are here today to dream, to set your sights on things that you want to do and then pursue them. Don't be afraid. You will be surprised at the folks who are out there that want to help."

Bishop talked about George Solonevich, the Russian-born artist who was inspired by King. Solonevich was jailed in Stalinist Russia before fleeing the country. He passed through Nazi-era Germany before finally making it to the United States and moving to the Roanoke Valley in 1955.

In 1963, Bishop said, Solonevich saw King arrested on television. A friend who was there, Bishop said, "remembered how George Solonevich wrung his hands and was just so troubled by seeing that on television, and thought about his own unjust imprisonment while he was in Europe in concentration camps, and how they had escaped and made their way here to the United States - to the land of the free! - and how hard it was for him to see Dr. King in handcuffs, from seeking justice and respect and an end to segregation."

Solonevich channeled that emotion into a collection of prints called "Freedom's Price." Bishop said Jefferson College is now selling the prints, which includes the image of King, with money going to endow a scholarship for Roanoke public high school graduates who are accepted into the school's paramedic- or EMS-related degree programs. The first scholarship will be awarded this year, Bishop said.

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