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‘Becoming the Beloved Community: Unity in Diversity’ this year’s theme

Community members from various backgrounds and ethnicities gathered at the Gallup Cultural

Center Jan. 15 to honor Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. on his birthday. The event included a march from the train station to the Larry Brian Mitchell Recreation Center.

“Becoming the Beloved Community: Unity in Diversity” was the theme for the Gallup tribute to the late civil rights leader who would have turned 89 this year, if not for his untimely death.

For many participating, like Ettie Anderson, the march offered a platform to protest racism and the current president.

“I wanted to participate in the march because of my frustration with the current administration,” she said. “We need to stand together right now for change.”

Representatives from the Bahá’í, Christian, Jewish and Native American faiths shared prayers during the “Interfaith Litany for Peace and Justice,” which included a reading of the “The Inner Truth,” a speech given by King at the Riverside Church in New York City on April 4, 1967.

“The oceans of history are made turbulent by the ever-rising tides of hate. History is cluttered with the wreckage of nations and individuals that pursued this self-defeating path of hate,” King said in the address.

The Gallup Police Department, Gallup Fire Department, Community Service Aide and Gallup Express participated in the march, blocking traffic to the front and rear of the marchers.

Anna Rondan and others carried a banner for the McKinley Worker Justice Coalition at the front of the group. Others carried placards with an image of King.

Activist Kim Wahpupah carried a sign that read “Protect the Sacred” on one side and “We Stand for Bears Ears NO DAPL” on the other.

When the group of 50-plus marchers reached the Larry Brian Mitchell Recreation Center, the “City of Gallup Tribute to Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.” began inside the facility, with a huge American flag as the backdrop.

For this event, “Celebrating Diversity in McKinley County” was the theme. It featured entertainment by the Miyamura High School Choir and the St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church Choir.

Steve Rogers, retired Gallup teacher, provided the welcome address to an emotional crowd.

“On behalf of the city of Gallup, we want to welcome you to this event to honor and celebrate Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday,” he said. “Our world seems to be going through some drastic changes lately and now, more than ever, we need to take action to remedy some of the problems we see coming up with regard to racism, materialism, and sexism.”

Cal Curley, field representative for Sen. Tom Udall, D-NM, addressed the audience next and shared a message from the senator.

“Dr. King’s dream was that we could emerge from the battles of marches of the civil rights movement as a better nation,” Udall’s message read. “He and others sacrificed so that African Americans and people of all races and backgrounds could live together as equals.”

Udall’s comment addressed the racist, derogatory remarks made by the president and said such actions demand people to stand up and make it clear that the American people will not tolerate racism and accept hate.

Community members offered personal reflections on the influences of King.

Laura Jijon, adult education director at the UNM Gallup North Campus, thanked the audience for participating. She grew up in Compton, Calif. and her Jewish background kept her grounded

during one of the most violent times of the civil rights era.

“It was a very poor community, a very violent community and we struggled with a lot of issues that we struggle with in Gallup, of addictions, domestic violence and crime,” Jijon said.

The blessing of heroic teachers shaped her life, she said, adding that media coverage on school shootings and other violence was non-existent in Compton, because nobody cared about the poor people.

“The schools I attended in Compton, [shootings] happened all the time. We regularly had bombings at our schools. Not bomb threats, but bombings, and we’d have to be evacuated,” Jijon said.

When she was 13, she witnessed a murder during a gang war on campus. The daily support of her teachers protected her during those times. The assassination of King, however, brought the possibility of race riots.

“It was one of the great American tragedies,” she said. “What we educators call a teachable moment. The seed was planted and from that day forward, I decided to become a teacher.”

She has now taught for more than 40 years.

Rogers, who grew up in a small, rural, all-white town in Iowa, spoke next. His father was a minister and his mother home schooled him.

“I found it kind of ironic that when I tried to talk about [civil rights] with my friends, they didn’t understand because there was no experience,” he said.

However, the speeches of King on television made an impact on his heart and in college, he volunteered to go to McComb, Mississippi.

Upon entering the town, all seemed quiet. The streets were well lit, the houses neat with freshly mowed lawns.

“And then we drove across the railroad tracks. Suddenly there were no lighted streets. The streets were not paved. They were dirt roads,” he said.

They found the house they were to stay at easily enough, however, because it was lit up with spotlights. This was because the home had recently been riddled with bullet holes.

“This was America, the land of freedom. I was in shock,” he said.

The next day, they went house-to-house with questionnaires for the residents. Their houses were riddled with bullet holes, too.

“Teenagers from the other side of town, white kids, they come over and target practice on our house. The police won’t come,” Rogers quoted the residents as saying.

The experience impacted Rogers’ life and he continued to support the civil rights movement through the years.

Rev. Fredrick Davis also delivered a fiery speech. He is the pastor of St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church in Gallup.

“My mother always told me don’t let what people do or say cause you to go down to their level, raise them up to yours,” he said. “She said everybody’s green, we just have some light greens

and dark greens. Everybody's got two eyes, two ears, two arms, two legs. Everybody's got a beating heart and kidneys. Everybody, if we cut our hand, we would bleed red."

We are all the same, Davis said in conclusion, adding that racist thinking is something that is taught by the parents. His message was clear: don't teach your children to hate.

The City of Gallup sponsored the Jan. 15 tribute and events.