

Public Service and Remembrance in Honor of King THE WASHINGTON POST

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On a holiday when she could have gone shopping or hung out at home, Tanya Brown chose to celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday by volunteering at the District's largest homeless shelter.

She didn't go alone; she made sure to bring along her daughters, 12-year-old twins. They joined dozens of volunteers yesterday painting, cleaning and ministering to the needy at the Center for Creative Non-Violence, at 2nd and D streets NW.

"I wanted my girls to understand how important it is to serve the community," said Brown, 40, a Delta Air Lines flight attendant who lives on Capitol Hill. "I wanted them to know how privileged they are. We talk about it, but you need to see it."

From volunteering to church-sponsored discussions, from the synchronized ring of bells to film screenings, a broad and diverse spectrum of the Washington region found myriad ways yesterday to commemorate the late civil rights leader's 79th birthday.

President Bush joined in the celebration, traveling by motorcade from the White House to the District's Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library, where he encountered a group of youngsters at story time.

When the reader asked the kids how they could improve the world, they were silent, perhaps distracted by the encroaching throng that included Bush, first lady Laura Bush and Mayor Adrian M. Fenty (D).

"Love your neighbor," the president said eagerly as the reader nodded approvingly.

Then, in brief remarks, Bush described King as a "towering figure in the history of our country" and urged Americans to honor his memory by "reaching out to someone who hurts, by just simply living a life of kindness and compassion."

Volunteerism was a mantra of the day.

At a prayer breakfast sponsored by Ebony Scholarship Society in Prince George's County, Cain Hope Felder, a Howard University professor, said that attending ceremonial events was only a small aspect of saluting King.

"You have not made a witness to King's legacy if you have attended a breakfast," Felder said. "Being a witness requires more than praising someone else. It requires doing something."

Later, more than 1,300 people crowded into First Baptist Church of Glenarden for an often-spirited discussion on race relations. The speakers included Prince George's political leaders and representatives from the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee and the National Council of La Raza, a Hispanic civil rights group.

"In terms of King's relevance, we have to make sure he just doesn't become a historical figure who dealt with integration," the county's state's attorney, Glenn F. Ivey, told the audience. "King spoke about war, race and justice [in ways] that are relevant today, and we need to keep them in mind and put them in action."

Others marked the day by watching film footage about King's life, from his participation in the Montgomery bus boycott to his assassination 40 years ago this April.

"It's so potent, how it affects you," Deborah Green, 44, a District resident, said after watching "King: A Filmed Record...Montgomery to Memphis" at the American Film Institute's Silver Theatre and Cultural Center in Silver Spring. "It's not like I haven't seen some of it before, but all that footage of the marches, hosing and church bombings put together – you just get tense watching it unfold."

For Mark Alexander, 47, the film revived childhood memories of the rioting that erupted in Washington after King's death. "I remember watching the military marching down 16th Street and the toy store down the street burning up," he said.

At least one teenager in the audience emerged with questions. After watching the footage of police beating civil rights marchers, 15-year-old Emahn Avery asked her grandmother, Verna Avery Brown, why the protesters didn't fight back.

"Don't you see, that's just it, that's the essence of Dr. King's story," Brown told her as they left the theater. "By not fighting back, they got power to fight back on a bigger level. That's when things started to change."

In Leesburg, several hundred people marched in the annual King parade. Participants included representatives of church groups, Masons dressed in black suits and people carrying peace banners as they walked a mile-long route.

Later, Alexandria hosted a postermaking contest celebrating King's life, which featured 150 entries created by elementary school children.

"If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be here," said Jae Saraum, 11, who won first place among fifth-graders for her King poster. "I'm glad we're all equal now. That's because of him."

The day's events also included a bell-ringing ceremony organized by the Historical Society of Washington D.C. As part of the event, D.C. Council member Marion Barry (D-Ward 8) donated a photograph of himself with King that he said was taken in North Carolina in 1960.

In the photo, King is seated, while Barry, then a leader with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, stands in the background, wearing a blazer and tie.

"This is real for me," Barry told the audience before recounting where he was when he learned that King had died. "It's not a story, it's not a fairy tale."

A few minutes later, he glanced again at the photograph and smiled wistfully. "Brings back a lot of memories," he said.

Staff writers Daniela Deane and Hamil R. Harris contributed to this report.