Next Generation Takes Spotlight at MLK Day Event

LCCPS Cambodian Dancers, from left, Jocelyn Priim, 11, Mira Sebastiao, 10, Lily Kin, 11, Isabel Campos, 11, and Katherine Quijada, 12, all of Lowell, dance at the Martin Luther King Jr. event, organized by Living the Dream Partners.

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LOWELL » Onlookers in a zigzagging line held hands and linked arms, echoing a popular image of the civil rights era. In front of the crowd, the University of Massachusetts Lowell Gospel Choir and former event organizer Lura Smith sang.

“We walk hand-in-hand,” they sang. “I really do believe we shall overcome.”

Students in the Red House Collective, a jazz band out of the Innovation Academy Charter School, started playing mid-way through the song. The music swelled, closing out Lowell’s 22nd annual Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration.

The event was organized by Living the Dream Partners, a coalition of community organizations including the African Community Center of Lowell, Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell, Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association of Greater Lowell, Coalition for a Better Acre, Middlesex Community College, Middlesex Community College Foundation, Lowell Public Schools, Girls Inc. of Greater Lowell and UMass Lowell. Donna Corbin, executive assistant to the president of Middlesex Community College, coordinated the partners.

For two decades, Smith organized the event. Leadership shifted to these organizations. She retired two years ago.

“You passed the torch,” said Reginald Nichols, this year’s co-host. “We’ll keep it running.”

Students at Pyne Arts Magnet School took the stage as different current and historical figures, including Rosa Parks, Malala Yousafzai, John F. Kennedy and Mother Theresa. Dressed in a graduation robe, Jason Iraheta spoke as King.

“Today my legacy still

Brent Smith of Tewksbury attends the event with daughter River and son Brent Smith II.
stands,” he said. “People fight nonviolently for what is needed in their society. Everybody can be great, because anybody can serve.”

The event also included performances by students from Lowell Community Charter Public School and Mill Advised Dance Troupe. Sculptures made during a Girls Inc. program decorated each table in the hall at the UMass Lowell Inn & Conference Center.

“They were created by girls and members who listen to Dr. King’s iconic ‘I Have A Dream’ speech and are then asked to translate their own responses into three-dimensional art,” said coordinator Pam Laroque.

U. S. Rep. Lori Trahan took the stage and described deepening income inequality in the United States. The country, she said, has racial and social gaps in access to health care, housing, education and even clean water. Hate speech is on the rise across the world, she said.

Martin Luther King Jr. day is a time to celebrate King’s life and legacy, but also take into account the current state of the country, she said.

“If there was ever a time for us to spread the teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King and have them contagious beyond our own families, it is this moment we’re living in right now,” Trahan said.

Middlesex Community College President James Mabry and Lowell Mayor John Leahy also spoke at the event.

“Lowell is a great place,” Leahy said. “We always come together and we always are here to do our part and to share with the community.”

Several members of community organizations were presented with the Living the Dream Award and citations from the city. Winners include Mercy Anampiu, director of health promotion at the Lowell Community Health Center; Leslie Rivera, re-engagement specialist at UTEC; and Sally Thayer, nutrition manager at the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell. A Lowell organization launching nationwide LGBT history curriculum for middle and high school students, History UnErased, was also honored.

Award winners, from left, History UnErased director of learning and development Steven LaBounty-McNair and executive director Deb Fowler, representing the organization award winner, and individual award recipients Mercy Anampiu, Leslie Rivera and Sally Thayer.

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