

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Territory Celebrates the Life and Legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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Cynthia Graham **January 19, 2015**



In 1969, one year after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated and more than a decade before the United States would designate an official holiday in his name, the U.S. Virgin Islands was first to move to establish a holiday in the civil rights leader's honor.

This nugget of Virgin Islands history was one of the many captivating moments attendees were treated to earlier today at the 21st Annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Celebration, hosted by the Central Labor Council of the Virgin Islands at Budhoe Park in Frederiksted.







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Schools, organizations, churches, political leaders, dignitaries and the St. Croix community turned out in large numbers to commemorate Dr. King's life and to showcase their talents in the process.

Marching bands and majorettes from local middle and high schools made their way through the streets of Fsted town with much vigor. Representatives of organizations, s Clubs, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, and others, were also a part of the jubilant procession.



Alfredo Andrews Elementary students dance to Tamela Mann's

"Take Me To The King."

The celebration culminated at the bandstand where a sometimes solemn, sometimes cheerful ceremony, MC'd by George Otto, was put on.

One of the many highlights of the ceremony was the reading of Dr. King's famous "I Have A Dream" speech by student Dante Harris. King gave the speech at the August 28, 1963 March on Washington in front of a crowd of some 250,000 people assembled in the nation's capital.

Students from the Evelyn M. Williams Elementary School recited a number of notable quotes from the slain civil rights leader, including: "Science investigates; religion interprets. Science gives man knowledge, which is power; religion gives man wisdom, which is control. Science deals mainly with facts; religion deals mainly with values. The two are not rivals."

In his brief remarks, Senate President Neville James said, "St. Croix is responsible for a lot of how America is today." The senator was making reference to the activism of St. Croix native, David Hamilton Jackson, who, in the early 1900s--long before the 1960s Civil Rights Movement--fought for labor rights, freedom of the press and against other inequalities in the Danish West Indies.

A moment of silence was held for "all the freedom fighters who have made the ultimate sacrifice."

The program continued with an interpretive dance selection from students at the Alfredo Andrews Elementary School to the award-winning song, "Take Me To The King," by gospel recording artist, Tamela Mann. Music in Motion dancers also performed a recording of the 1960's civil rights era anthem, "We Shall Over



Music in Motion dancers perform to recording of "We Shall

Overcome."

The *VI Consortium* caught up with Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett at today's event. She said Dr. King's fight of the 1960s, as it relates to voter disenfranchisement, continues today in the Virgin Islands and in all U.S. territories.

"We, in the Virgin Islands, have a continued struggle that people don't know about. We continue to be disenfranchised by not being able to vote for the President of the United States. Much of this comes from centuries xenophobia."

As U.S. citizens, Plaskett said Virgin Islanders and persons living in all U.S. territories should have the right to vote for the person that occupies the nation's highest office.

When asked what her plans are to remedy the situation, she said she would likely join litigation that has been on going on the matter and also introduce legislation.

"I have not forgotten and as your Delegate, I will be putting that forth," Plaskett said. She also praised parents and teachers for bringing the large numbers of students who were present at the ceremony.

In reflecting on Dr. King's legacy, Sen. Terrance "Positive" Nelson, who pointed out that he did not attend the ceremony in his official capacity as a senator, stressed the importance of Virgin Islanders embracing "individual responsibility" in order to affect change in the community.

Cecil Benjamin, chair and executive director of the Virgin Islands Democratic Party, said, while the nation has come a long way in realizing Dr. King's dream of equality and stamping out injustice, there is still work to be done.

"Jobs, dignity, and social and economic inequality are still on the table, that means we



Audience members hold hands and sing, "We

Shall Overcome."

He pointed out that when the Virgin Islands decided it would designate a day to recognize the achievements of Dr. King in 1969, the then-young Congressman John Conyers came to St. Croix to help establish that effort.

Lisa Rampersad, who co-hosted the event and is the daughter of Antoinette Rampersad, the local civil rights committee chair, said it is important for the territory to keep alive traditions such as the Dr. King holiday and the recognition of other Virgin Islanders who were responsible for bringing about change.

Rampersad, 25, said she hopes to organize a march in the near future to commemorate the contributions of Virgin Islanders who forged a path in the struggle against injustice within the territory. She welcomes help and input from the public at 340-332-9448.

The four-hour event also included musical performances by local artists D'NYCE,; twin brothers Kevin and Kai of K-Factor; Courtney Hicks and Jahmani Johnson; Breanna Campbell; Javan James and Skip Moss. Antonio Cruz performed a poem about the importance of movement, followed by an acrobatic demonstration.

Senators Novelle Francis, Jr. and Sammuel Sanes were also in attendance, but did not give remarks.

The ceremony concluded with the holding of hands and the singing of "We Shall Overcome," in a sign of solidarity with Dr. King's timeless message of 'liberty and justice for all.'

President Ronald Reagan signed the holiday--recognized on the third Monday in January--into law in 1983. It was first celebrated in the States three years later.

Dr. King, a Baptist minister, was killed on April 4, 1968 in Memphis, Tenn. for his stance against racial injustice and inequality.

Feature Image: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s bust in Washington, D.C. and participants at Monday's King celebration at Budhoe Park, F'sted.

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