

Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration Remarks January 18, 2010

Thank you and welcome to Shippensburg University's annual celebration of the life, the ideals and the accomplishments of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. This is a day of celebration not only here, but in communities large and small throughout our nation and, actually, everywhere in the world where people seek freedom and justice.

Dr. King's life is well-known and has become an integral part of the history of our nation. I would doubt that there are very few among us who do not know at least portions of his famous "I Have a Dream Speech." Those words, spoken so eloquently, so forcefully, and so persuasively, are among the most important ever as they brought hope to those with little hope and gave courage to those who, in the ensuing years would need all their courage to help achieve his dream of equality in the United States.

In the subsequent years since his tragic assassination, our nation has changed. According to Dr. King, "Change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle. And so we must straighten our backs and work for our freedom. A man can't ride you unless your back is bent."

The change is evident throughout the United States and is seen nowhere more dramatically than in the White House where our nation's first African-American President is ending his first year on leadership. Due to the efforts by Dr. King and the other many leaders of the Civil Rights movement, in large part, helped in the election of President Obama.

In addition, the difficult — and often dangerous — work by those women and men of vision during those turbulent years, and even up through today, has also helped many others. In the halls of Congress, in the New York City boardrooms, in the many seats of power around our country, and in the many, many small communities, men and women of color, and women or women and men of many other backgrounds now take their rightful places of leadership. Their ascents to these important positions are among Dr. King's many legacies and are a testament to the power of his words and ideas.

As much as a dreamer Dr. King was, he was also a pragmatist. He knew that what he was seeking and was advocating were not going to be easy to achieve. In one of his speeches, he said, “Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals.”

That remains true today. If we are to continue his work, if we are to continue to progress — as a society and as individuals — we all must be dedicated, be passionate and hold onto our collective and individuals dreams and goals. That is especially true for the young people here today, for our students at Shippensburg University, and for those even younger who hold the future in their hearts and minds. It is through their work and through their lives that we will continue to change our nation and our world. As Shippensburg’s president, I take great pride in knowing that members of our very diverse student body have the skills and talents to ensure that our world tomorrow is truly better than it is today.

It is our hope — my hope — that the work of Dr. King and those many other heroes remains alive here at Shippensburg University and that we can all share in the progress to fulfillment of his dream of equality. It is also our promise that we will continue to do what we can to make that dream real.

Thank you for being here and for sharing in this wonderful celebration.