

Connections made with the MLK Jr. legacy and Milledgeville community

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With an overwhelming theme of service and community, songs were sung, students presented their winning prose and other inspirational messages filled the air of the Magnolia Ballroom on the campus of Georgia College & State University on a bitterly cold Friday morning. The college and the MLK committee hosted the King’s Breakfast 2026 to celebrate the continuing impact of what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. brought to the nation in a tragically shortened life.

As an example, attendees heard that even if you are a simple street sweeper, let everyone know you are the best street sweeper there is.

Dr. Dan Nadler, vice president for student life at GCSU, welcomed everyone to an important time of reflection. He said there’s a shared responsibility not only on the university campus but throughout Milledgeville. The theme for the program was “Living the Legacy: Justice, Service and the Beloved Community,” and Nadler said GCSU strives to help its students grow academically and into engaged citizens and compassionate leaders.

“We remain focused on creating an environment where every student feels supported, challenged,” he said. “Our commitment to belonging, service and justice is not abstract. It is (seen) throughout our classrooms, our residence halls, student organizations and community partners.”

Nadler added he wished there were more opportunities to gather in this manner and celebrate the achievements of students and alumni and to fellowship with one another.

“Dr. King’s vision of the beloved community continues to inspire us,” he said. “To build bridges and stand for justice and care deeply for one another.

Dr. Michael T. Snowden, executive director of the Office of Inclusion and Belonging, served as Master of Ceremonies and pianist for the program’s musical presentations. That included “I Know Where I’ve Been” by Charlegmayne Gholson and an audience rendition of “Live Every Voice and Sing.”

On display were the top projects in the student art competition, the works done by Wade Rich, Madison Hurt and Annabell Jones.

On behalf of recently reelected Milledgeville Mayor Mary Parham-Copelan, Mayor Pro Tem Denese Shinholster reminded the audience of one of King’s statements, that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. It was in Milledgeville — at a time in history, the Civil Rights era and into the 1970s and ‘80s — she said several communities were in turmoil but this one was a ‘beloved community’ and made strides to provide a community that was inclusive. She said there was collaboration with the faith-based community to provide a society of mutual respect, one that met the needs of the community.

Student Ava King read her winning poem and London Eldridge read his winning essay. A 10th-grader, Eldridge attends Georgia College Early College. He concluded by saying that young people such as himself — especially in Milledgeville — have a special voice, and to a new generation, the lessons of Dr. King still matter six decades later. He said they should acknowledge non-violence, moral courage and a commitment to service.

A GCSU alumnus and current school teacher, Demetrius Nelson, delivered the keynote address titled “The Blueprint.” He was appreciative of how the work of local students were highlighted in the program and how well they contributed to the occasion.

Nelson did a little play on words with “legacy,” first saying that legacy begets legacy.

“It’s the legs I see,” said Nelson. “I paint a picture of the legs of Dr. King and the other Civil Rights leaders and supporters and how their legs went the distance so we could go just a little further. It was Dr. King’s legacy that opened the door and encouraged the legacy we have ... to desegregate.”

Nelson spoke of when the first five African-American students desegregated Georgia College and increased the richness of the campus and paving the way for others to be in their respective positions.

“Their perseverance and courage laid the blueprint,” said Nelson. He recalled the ‘What is your life’s blueprint?’ speech by King made at a junior high in Philadelphia six months before his death. He took the opportunity to be a teacher again on this day in Milledgeville.

“This is the most crucial period in your lives,” said Nelson. From Dr. King’s speech, he paraphrased: “Whenever a building is constructed, you usually have an architect who draws a blueprint, and that blueprint serves as the guide ... to build the building. A building is not well erected without a good, sound and solid blueprint.”

The speech goes on to say this means you are in the process of building the structure of your life. So what should be in life blueprint? Belief in one’s own dignity, that you count, that your life has worth and significance.

“You should not be ashamed of your color,” said Nelson.

King’s next blueprint requirement is a determination to achieve excellence in any field, whatever your life’s work becomes. Even in King’s time, he said there were proverbial doors open to young people that were not open to their parents. The challenge then comes in getting ready to go through those doors, so encouraged to continue study, sticking with it and never dropping out.

King said you just may hear somebody say about you, there lived a great street sweeper if you do it like a master painter or poet applied their craft.

“Don’t allow anybody to pull you so low to make you hate them,” said Nelson. “Don’t allow anyone to cause you to lose your self respect to the point that you do not struggle for justice. No matter how young you are or old you are, you have a responsibility to make life better for everybody. And so you must be involved in the struggle for freedom and justice.”