Treasure Coast citizens hold MLK Day rally

Jan Allen, a member of the Treasure Coast community.

Originally published 06:46 a.m., January 18, 2012
Updated 06:46 a.m., January 18, 2012

PORT ST. LUCIE — On Jan. 16, Treasure Coast citizens held a rally to commemorate the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s legacy of social justice.

Adults and children, ranging in age from 3 to 8, held signs reflecting some of King’s core values, including unity and equality.

Co-organizer and Port St. Lucie resident April Nall said she decided to do something after reflecting on King’s message and the continued problem of racism.

“I felt a strong call to do something after listening to Dr. King’s speeches and connecting it to my own families’ financial situation and struggle to live more ethical lives,” said Nall, who brought her three children, ages 3, 7, and 8 to the event.

“It’s also disturbing to become aware that people of color still have to find a way to cope with oppression in our society today, more than underprivileged whites do.”

Participants also sought to remind fellow Port St. Lucie residents of some of King’s often forgotten messages.

Co-organizer and Florida Atlantic University adjunct instructor Dr. Jeffrey Nall notes that in addition to fiercely condemning racism, King died struggling to promote economic justice and nonviolence in both personal relationships and foreign policy.

“We didn’t realize that Rev. King died a very unpopular man in many circles,” said Dr. Nall. “In his April 4, 1967 speech, ‘Beyond Vietnam,’ he expressed his strident objections to not only interracial violence but also American military violence.”

At the rally, area residents received honks of encouragement as they waved to ongoing traffic. The assortment of signs read “What would MLK do?,” “unity,” “stop racism now,” “peaceful ends through peaceful means,” and “people over profit.”
According to Nall, King’s ideas about warfare and human rights were as daring, if not radical, as racial equality. “For instance, in Beyond Vietnam, King called on American to 'undergo a radical revolution of values,' said Nall. "And he urged the nation to move from ‘thing-oriented society,' valuing ‘profit motives and property rights’ over people, towards a nation who fully honored the value of human life."

King’s message is as poignant and relevant as ever given the contemporary disparity between wealth and power between the rich and poor. Today the richest 400 Americans possess more wealth than the poorest 60 percent of U.S. households. As confirmed by PoliticFact.com, the 2012 net worth of the Forbes 400 was $1.37 trillion dollars, while the poorest 60 percent of U.S. households was valued at $1.26 trillion dollars.

The 2011 Census Bureau report found that 1 in 6 Americans (46.2 million) lived in poverty in 2010, the highest rate of poverty in 50 years. A separate report found that nearly 1 in 6 Americans (almost 15 percent) are on food stamps.

Research shows that both people of color and young families are particularly vulnerable to poverty. A Northeastern University study found that, in 2010, 37 percent of young families with children were living in poverty. A disheartening number of white, non-Hispanics live in poverty, about 20 million or nearly 10 percent. But the percentage of blacks and Hispanics in poverty is more than twice as high. The poverty rate is 27.4 percent among blacks and 26.6 percent among Hispanics.

Indeed, King’s vision of racial equality continues to go unfulfilled for the vast majority of people of color in America. As of December 2011, unemployment rates among blacks are twice that of whites, 15.8 percent compared to 7.5 percent. Black unemployment has consistently been double that of white unemployment since the government began tracking such figures in 1972.

According to a 2009 Human Rights Watch report, adult African Americans were arrested on drug charges at rates that were 2.8 to 5.5 times as high as those of white adults in every year from 1980 through 2007 despite the fact whites and blacks engage in drug offenses at comparable rates.