

Performances explore legacy

Spoken-word event honors King

BY ASHLEY NICOLE LEWIS
STAFF WRITER

The Sonja Haynes Stone Center was filled Monday night with people of all backgrounds trying to explore Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy through poetry, music and spoken word.

"He Was A Poem: A Gathering in the Tradition" included performances by musician Bradley Simmons of the Duke University Djembe Ensemble, poet Lita Hooper, and spoken-word artists Kim Arrington and UNC junior Donovan Livingston. Also performing as a part of the musical tribute was Ron Baxter and R-EFFECT, a local five-member jazz band.

The annual event was sponsored by the Stone Center.

Children holding candles filed into the room while Simmons opened the program playing the drums. Stone Center director Joseph Jordan gave opening remarks about the goals of the performance, expressing sentiments to reach out to people of all ages.

"The common theme of the event was to celebrate artistically the life of Dr. King and his work by highlighting the many dimensions of his life beyond the public figure and as an individual who chose to utilize his gifts in ways that still resonate even today," said Ursula Littlejohn, the organizer of

the event.

Some artists and organizers said they aimed to create an image of King in their performances that went deeper than his famed endeavors.

"It's challenging to try to speak from the perspective of such a giant historical figure," Hooper said. "I wanted to personalize the piece, to give it depth so that readers could see the man, not just the history maker."

Some artists in the performance spoke about the ongoing pursuit of civil rights young people face in today's world.

While some used more modern forms of performance, such as Livingston's vibrant rap-esque set, others chose to strike a more traditional chord.

Arrington's solo, "Strange Fruit," a song first popularized by early 20th century jazz singer Billie Holiday, was chilling in its message and delivery. The song about lynching in the American South was brought to life through Arrington's haunting and deep voice.

Organizers said they chose the spoken word, poetry and musical mediums for the program in order to express how empowering King himself found spoken word and artistic expression, as well as to ensure that this message continues to impact audiences.



DTH/BEN PIERCE
Drummer Bradley Simmons performs the processional at "He Was a Poem: A Gathering in the Tradition," honoring Martin Luther King Jr.

"I'm delighted to see such variety among the planned events," Hooper said. "Luckily, this is a holiday that is not defined by one particular tradition."

Some in attendance also said they found the use of poetry very effective in communicating King's messages.

"I think that poetry is a fuller means of communication than prosaic, less performative, traditional speech," Chapel Hill resident Silas Webb said.

"It's much more effective than being spoken at."

Just as King called for unity among the American people during the civil rights movement, organizers led the audience in an impromptu singing of "Lift Every Voice and Sing," symbolizing a need for unity today.

Questioning what King would be doing if he were alive today, Jordan closed the performance with a statement to the audience that the civil rights movement is far from dead, even in 2008.

Contact the Arts Editor at artsdesk@unc.edu.

King celebration beats out the cold

BY KRISTEN CRESANTE
STAFF WRITER

Even though the 15-degree weather cancelled the annual Martin Luther King Jr. Day rally, it didn't stop Camellia Lee.

The East Chapel Hill High School junior stood outside the Franklin Street Post Office where the rally would have begun. There, Lee welcomed participants who did not know about the cancellation with muffins and hot cocoa.

"I just wanted everybody to come together today," she said.

Later Monday morning, the 27th annual commemoration of King's life went on as planned at First Baptist Church in Chapel Hill, located at 106 N. Roberson St.

Lee joined students, residents and local officials to fill every pew in the church.

The group gathered in the church to sing and pray to honor the civil rights movement.

"We've come here today not just to celebrate but to challenge each and every one of us to the task that we know has not been fulfilled," said the Rev. Gene Hatley, of Barbee's Chapel Baptist Church and president of the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance.

Keynote speaker Reverend Curtis Gatewood, second vice president of the N.C. National



DTH/EMMA PATTI
Grace Dodge, 7, shows off her "Dr. King had a dream" sign that she made for the MLK Day rally at the Franklin Street Post Office.

Association for the Advancement of Colored People and president of the Granville County NAACP, started off his speech by doing a rap with his daughter, Desmera, about King.

The rap combined poetic lyrics with the traditional chant "We Shall Overcome," during which the entire congregation joined in.

Gatewood emphasized the importance of preparing today's youth for the future.

"Dr. King is calling a new generation to pick up the baton, and we must do it to save our children," Gatewood said. "The best way to celebrate Martin Luther King's history is to save our children for the future."

Gatewood spoke of today's entertainment and its effect on youth.

"We need to stop things that say it's okay to forego education, go into the streets, and become pimps and 'gangstas' and 'wankstas,' and all these other 'thangstas,'" Gatewood said.

He also said children shouldn't be blamed because it is the responsibility of adults to raise them correctly.

"The thing about it is it's possible."

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