

MLK legacy still a

Memories of his visit at ceremony on anniversary of his assassination

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On the day 50 years ago that the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Julius Pearce was driving alone when he heard the news.

Freeport's first African-American police officer, then 34, pulled over and "I took my feelings out within the confines of a police car," he recalled Tuesday.

"My reaction was anger, first of all, complete anger, and then I went into something I don't usually do: I cried," he said. "I didn't bother talking to anybody about it, I wasn't in the mood to talk to anybody."

Fifty years later, Pearce and others who were alive then share the searing memory of when a 20th century icon was struck down April 4, 1968, by a bullet as he prepared to dine with friends. Some, like Pearce, mark that day and what it meant to them and the nation.

On Wednesday, he will be in the ceremonial chambers of the Nassau County executive and legislative office building in Mineola for a 6 p.m. event held by the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Birthday Celebration Committee of Nassau County, a county-affiliated group Pearce founded.

"The fact that he was assassinated 50 years ago, it is a solemn event for me," said Pearce, 84, of Freeport.

King had been in Memphis in support of a strike by African-American sanitation workers and had increasingly associated civil rights with class and economic inequalities. The event in Mineola will therefore honor a number of longtime county workers who were members of the civil service union, said event organizers.

The anniversary comes at a

time of heightened political divisiveness, demonstrations over police shootings of unarmed black men, and the emergence of widespread youth activism among both white, black and Latino students over the issue of gun violence. And while Pearce said he sees progress, "You'd have to be blind not to see the problems we're having today."

The Rev. Calvin Butts, an activist Harlem clergyman and president of SUNY Old Westbury, said Long Island and America continue to evade moral challenges King raised.

Too many people today mouth platitudes about King, Butts said Tuesday, while accommodating many of the injustices he fought, including rampant neighborhood segregation, substandard schools, sharp income disparities and other maladies that persist on Long Island. Butts said African-Americans have seen progress — in college attendance, in leadership of major businesses, and in the presidency of Barack Obama.

However, Butts said, "these are small achievements when compared to the masses of people — and now I'm speaking of all people, particularly poor white people, who do not have access to education because they can't afford it, who do not have access to quality health care because they can't afford it, who do not have access to quality housing because they can't afford it."

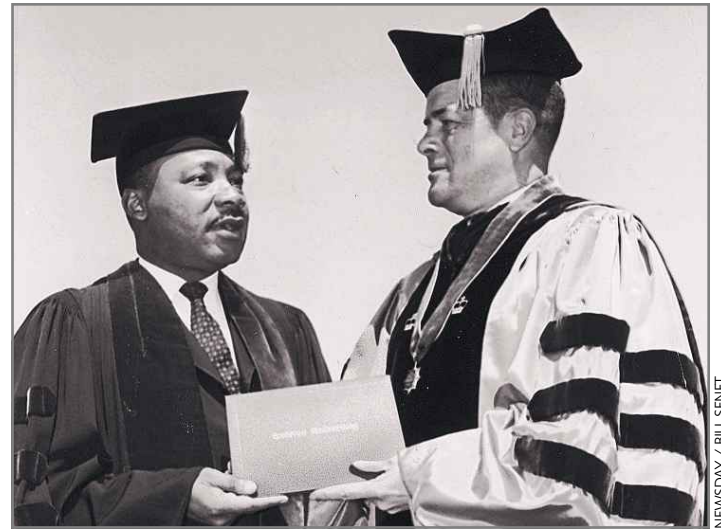
"So we have quite a battle in front of us against the forces of greed and war and exploitation and hatred and bigotry. . . . when I think of him I'm encouraged by his life, by his sacrifice of that life."

To commemorate the anniversary of King's death, the Diocese of Rockville Centre has scheduled a special prayer service Wednesday at 7:30 p.m. in the Cathedral of Saint Agnes. It will feature prayer, witness talks, a homily preached by Bishop John Barres and the Sr. Thea Bowman Mass Gospel Choir.

Of his homily, Barres said, "Celebrating the 50th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King's death, St. Agnes Cathedral and all the parishes on Long Island shake with joy as we reflect on Dr. King's dream and our Catholic baptismal responsibility to stand up against racism and to be instruments of the Divine Mercy in promoting

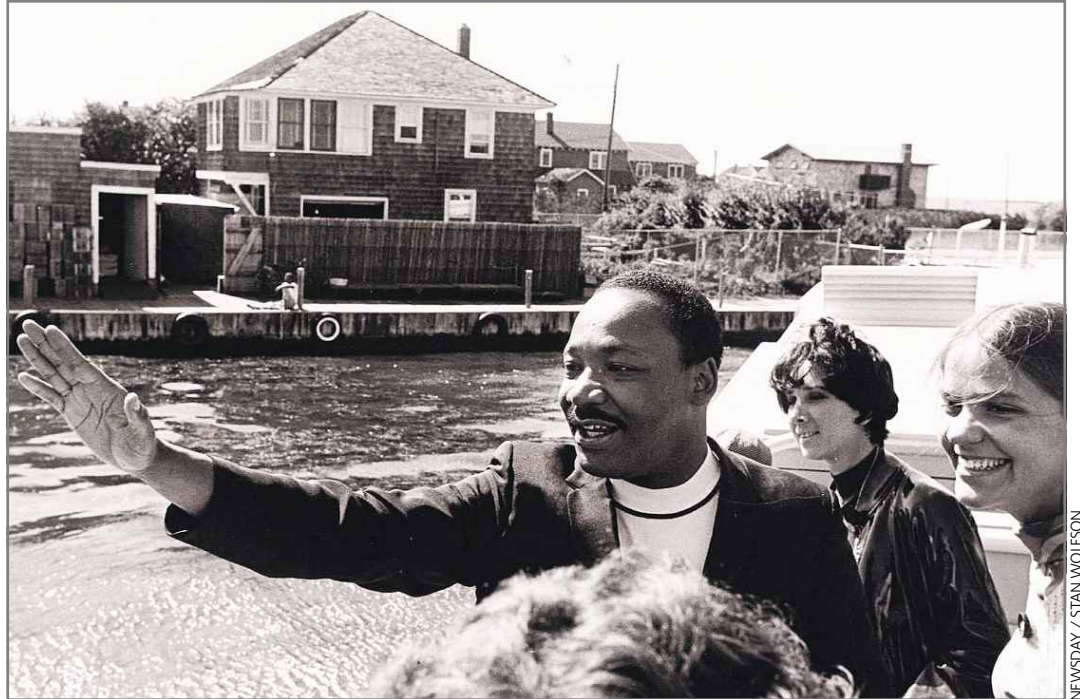


DANIELLE FINKELSTEIN



NEWSDAY / BILL SENFT

Julius Pearce, left, a founder of the MLK Birthday Celebration Committee of Nassau County on Tuesday. Above, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. receives honorary degree at Hofstra June 13, 1965.



NEWSDAY / STAN WOLFSON

King greets people who flocked to see him as he rides the Fire Island ferry on Sept. 2, 1967.

racial harmony and unity in the human family at this critical time in history."

Now, as student and black activism rises to a level not seen since the 1960s, advocates for change say King's example continues to inspire 50 years after his death.

Tom Malanga, a white gay rights activist who helped organize the defunct Empire State Pride Agenda, said King's non-

violent advocacy for human dignity has encouraged people from other marginalized groups to demand change.

"Dr. King set an example toward a pragmatic approach to creating change, about organizing and accepting progress in steps," said Malanga, of Central Islip.

"That's applicable to the LGBT community, just as it was for the civil rights movement."

EDITORIAL

50 years later, King's quest is far from won **A24**

strong force on LI



YEONG-JUNG YANG

Washington Square Park is filled Tuesday with those marking the 50th anniversary of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I've been to the mountaintop" speech.

Echoes of King heard in Washington Square Park

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s voice echoed throughout Washington Square Park on Tuesday evening, delivering his "I've Been to the Mountaintop" sermon.

Mayor Bill de Blasio and

first lady Chirlane McCray hosted the event, in which King's image was projected on both sides of the park's arch, to honor the speech's 50th anniversary.

The iconic speech was de-

livered April 3, 1968, the day before King was assassinated at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis.

"Fifty years ago today, he wrote a speech which defined his life's journey," de

Blasio said in his introductory remarks.

King had traveled to Memphis to support African-American sanitation workers in their fight for higher wages.

The speech focuses on themes of economic justice and ends with his famous meditation on his own mortality.

King was in the midst of planning the Poor People's March, a political campaign against economic disparity that ended with a march on Washington, D.C., later that year.

Tuesday, De Blasio arrived wearing a green New York City sanitation jacket.

"He believed the fight for economic justice was synonymous with the fight for civil rights," the mayor said.

After some brief remarks de Blasio stepped aside to let McCray speak.

It was misting after a rainy day. "Let it rain," McCray said. "Because we are the fire that no water can put out."

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