

36th Annual Memorial Observance of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
"True Peace is Not Merely the Absence of Tension; it is the Presence of Justice"

January 15, 2016, 12:00 pm.
City Council Chambers, Lansing, Michigan

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On behalf of the Ingham County Bar Foundation, we are honored to attend this Annual Memorial Observance of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," said Dr. Martin Luther King in 1963.

Today, as we gather to celebrate the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we cannot help but to reflect on how willing Dr. King was to make the ultimate sacrifice and give his life, in the interest of justice. Dr. King could have said at any point, this is not my fight, or I'll leave this to someone else to do, but he didn't. He instead chose to lead change. He envisioned the positive changes that could be brought about within the community by creating a culture of inclusion and equality among people. He focused intently on building a better life for future generations. He broke down silos amidst escalating racial tensions, garnering support from people of all races and creeds. He wasn't moved by politics, he was motivated by his desire to influence change, and as a result, he left such a tremendous legacy.

The legacy of Dr. King's message regarding justice became the significant part of the mission upon which the Ingham County Bar Foundation was founded. Among the Foundation's mission is to promote access to justice and to expand the availability of legal services to the public at large. In support of its mission, the Foundation's grant program includes this annual memorial observance of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s lasting impact on the legal profession, individuals, and government.

This memorial observance provides an opportunity to remember the vast teachings of Dr. King. It is also a time to renew those teachings in today's environment. Recently, President Obama in the State of Union Address on January 12, 2016 stated, in part, "We need to reject any politics that targets people because of race or religion. This isn't a matter of political correctness. It is a matter of understanding what makes us strong".

Indeed, how many people do you know of that would be willing to give their lives for the benefit of others – probably not that many. Most people, when faced with opposition, question whether something is worth the fight, or whether they should leave a problem to someone else to resolve. As citizens, however, we cannot and must not take the easy route out when we see injustice. We must commit ourselves to not only uphold the law, but to also seek out justice, to build up our communities, and to be agents of positive change.

Remembering that policies often begin globally and that implementation occurs locally, the individual members of the Ingham County Bar Foundation use their leadership, and capital to fund: (i) Peer to Peer Mediation in schools to teach using words not violence to solve arguments; (ii) Small Talk Children's Center to address child abuse; (iii) the Ingham County Veterans Treatment court to assist those who have given so much to our country; (iv) the Ingham County Sobriety court to assist those who have suffered human frailties of life; and (v) Legal Services of Couth Central Michigan to serve those who need assistance.

So you may ask, how can we be agents of positive change? How can we be champions of justice? We submit to you that we can do this by fighting to ensure that everyone, no matter their race, religion, gender, or socio-economic status, is able to obtain a fair outcome and have equal access within the legal system; by working to create law that promotes fair and equitable administration of the law; and by speaking out against injustice despite how unpopular it may be at the time.

People do not sit on the sidelines, in the community; as Dr. King stated in 1963, "I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham." "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." Implied in Dr. King's teachings is also the need to be inclusive. Likewise membership as provided in the ICBF charter is open to lawyers and non-lawyers.

Like Dr. King, we must ask ourselves, do we have the courage to stand against injustice despite how unpopular it may be? If so, then today, we challenge you i) to be bold, ii) to be ethical in all of your dealings, iii) to not allow politics to set your moral compass; if you believe in something, stand behind it., iv) to fight and advocate for those who cannot fight for themselves, and v) to seek justice when others would let it fail.

Finally, Dr. King provided guidance to us individually. "Lead a life so that others will remember you not by your wealth or position but by the content of your character."