

At Sarasota synagogue, a tribute to Martin Luther King Jr.

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Posted Jan 20, 2019 at 11:06 PM

Updated Jan 20, 2019 at 11:49 PM

Leaders from the African-American and Jewish communities came together Sunday in fellowship to celebrate the Civil Rights icon

SARASOTA — A rabbi who was once jailed with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave the ultimate compliment to a black poetry reader after a tribute to King at Temple Emanu-El in Sarasota. Eleven rabbis were jailed with King in Albany, Georgia, for “public prayer without a license” in 1962.

The poet, Curtis Davis, a poetry slam performer and teacher at “Heard’Em Say Teen Poetry,” delivered a raw and emotional political piece about the shooting of Markeis McGlockton of Clearwater. McGlockton was killed in a dispute over a parking space; the man who shot him invoked the “Stand Your Ground” self-defense law.

“The last two (poems) he recited, unbelievable,” said Everett Geldner, a rabbi involved in the Civil Rights Movement. “I told him, ‘Martin (Luther King Jr.) couldn’t have done it better. Wow.’”

Michael Drejka, 48, was charged with the fatal shooting of McGlockton — a shooting caught on video that led to public outrage.

Davis said it took weeks to write the poem, “Fire Fight,” last October. He also read another poem with ZenChristian Mott.

“It just really hit home and moved me to write a response to it,” said Davis, who lives in Tampa.

The readers were part of several performances by members of the African-American community, mostly youth, during the tribute to King hosted in the temple sanctuary by The Jewish Federation of Sarasota-Manatee. It was an hour-and-a-half program followed by a dessert fellowship.

“For those of us who participated (in the Civil Rights Movement), this is such an amazing renewal of the feeling and the experience,” Gendler said. “What we really have to remember is that problems must be identified, confronted and persist yet. Nothing happens overnight. The bread rises slowly and social transformation is baking bread; it’s not a fast order microwave. I think we have to address the issues, persist, recognize that our opponent is also our fellow human-being — it’s hard. That’s an impossible juggling act, but King, he was a tip-top juggler. He managed; we don’t.”

Geldner was involved in the second march back to Selma, Alabama, on March 9, 1965, called “Turnaround Tuesday,” and recalls King stopping them at the arch bridge near downtown Selma. He said he didn’t question him. The march came two days after the “Bloody Sunday” march involving about 600 civil rights marchers, ending with an estimated 17 to 50 injuries.

Geldner said he wanted people to remember King for his honesty.

“I think it’s extraordinary how King was able to focus on state clearly injustice and confront it always in a loving spirit, never excluding anyone from the human fabric,” Geldner said. “He was courageous. He stood up to Bull Connor (Commissioner of Public Safety) in Birmingham, but never dehumanized him.

“The brutality in Birmingham was substantial. The firehouse, King stood his ground, but never with rancor. Never in a way that excluded people. His affirmation of our deeper unity is needed perhaps more today than in those turbulent times.”

Jetson Grimes, a Newtown barber and historian, said it was rewarding to see youth involved in Sunday’s tribute that brought him to tears. Performances he says show that people have the ability to come together in dialogue and share common goals.

“I think once we start seeing each other reach out to each other, you are going to start seeing a tremendous difference to the dynamics of this country,” Grimes said. “Sometimes we fall into our holes and we never reach out to each other. ... I look at Sarasota as being very isolated sometimes — a really polarized community. We need to see that diversity among different ethnic groups in the community of Sarasota. I saw a lot of that today.”

State Rep. Wengay Newton, a St. Petersburg Democrat, said the presentation connected two communities that suffered oppression — the Jewish Holocaust and the Civil Rights Movement. He credited organizers for giving younger members of the congregations an opportunity to lead them.

“We had everyone on the same stage,” Newton said. “I looked at the audience; we had so much diversity. We had these young people who understood what happened. They know their history so they can know that they’re standing on the shoulders of giants as they go forward.

“It was beautiful.”

Performer Jay Camaro, a singer for the group “Greatness Beyond Measure,” said the songs were meant to uplift the audience and bring create unity.

“As an artist my ultimate goal is to uplift through my gift and to allow people to feel more than just the music, but to feel the feeling that I’m feeling when I’m performing,” said Camaro whose group received several ovations from the audience. “To see that at the end of my song was just amazing.”

Rabbi Brenner Glickman said the service was “uplifting and inspirational,” and accomplished two important things.

“One was a celebration of fellowship and unity,” the rabbi said. “The other was inspiration for us not to give up, to keep working to fulfill Dr. King’s dream.”

While Glickman was moved by the music, it was the words of King spoken more than 60 years ago and recited from the mouth of the Rev. Charles McKenzie that captivated him.

“They give me goosebumps as if they were spoken for the first time today,” Glickman said. “Just the power of that man, the greatest prophet of our era. His words are as powerful as ever.”