

Angelenos pay homage to Martin Luther King Jr.

Weekend events let children, others celebrate the civil rights leader's role in changing the United States.

By Carla Rivera

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The legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is very personal for Aaliyah Wilson. The seventh-grader said she experiences his vision of tolerance and harmony every day when she joins her diverse set of classmates at Culver City Middle School.

"Because he helped to defeat segregation, I have lifelong friends I never would have had," Aaliyah, 11, told a rapt group of listeners who gathered Sunday at the Culver City Senior Center for the city's fifth annual celebration honoring King.

The event, which began Saturday, featured a cultural marketplace, musical performances, children's activities, film screenings, a panel discussion and seminars.

The federal holiday will be observed today with the 25th Annual Kingdom Day Parade in South Los Angeles and service-oriented activities, including school beautification projects and blood drives.

At the Culver City event, Aaliyah was one of six students who won a youth speech contest, writing about King's accomplishments and why he was a hero to them.

Lauren Boxer, 11, a sixth-grader at Culver City Middle, watched King's "I Have a Dream" speech for research and said she was "blown away by his talent and conviction."

"The truth of the matter is we are all Dr. King's children now," Lauren said during her presentation. "I learned something about dignity and I learned something about justice."

Another contest winner, Harry Goldstein, 10, said he was inspired by King's courage. "No matter what it meant, whether being hit with batons or put into jail, he did everything to see blacks, whites, Jews, Muslims and all religions come together," said Harry, a fifth-grader at El Marino Elementary School. "He didn't let anything get in his way."

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Other student winners were Yuri Tateda from El Marino Elementary, Kelsey Ueda from Culver City Middle and Nicole Donaldson from Culver City High School.

It wasn't only the young who were affected by King's legacy. Culver City resident Sonia Sanders, 83, began weeping when she recalled the devastation she felt the day King was assassinated in 1968.

Sanders, who worked as a portrait artist for 22 years at Universal Studios, said she is old enough remember overt discrimination, including signs segregating blacks and whites on a 1960s bus trip to Phoenix.

"My feeling today is, it's a celebration," she said. "We have a black president, for goodness sakes. It's amazing."

Reminders of some of the attitudes King worked against were on display at the cultural marketplace, where one booth included memorabilia and artifacts including a 1927 sign with the words "Colored Waiting Room"; a carton of "Darkie Toothpaste," bearing a logo of a black man in a top hat; and currency issued by the Confederate States of America from the 1860s with depictions of slave labor.

The collection was assembled by Gail Deculus-Johnson, who sells some of the items with the goal of one day opening a museum. Johnson does presentations for schoolchildren who often are unaware of the history such artifacts represent. Johnson said she hopes that part of the celebration of Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy will always include such history lessons.

"We have to know where we've been to know where we're going," she said.