

Martin Luther King Jr. honored with bell-ringing

Participants apply the slain civil rights martyr's message to issues of economic equality and same-sex marriage

By Michael Tsai POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Jan 20, 2014



The ringing of the Nagasaki Peace Bell during Sunday's 26th annual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday Candlelight Bell Ringing Ceremony slowed traffic on Beretania Street, caused necks to crane and scared the birds out of nearby trees.

Dozens of participants lined up to ring the bell in a tribute to a man whose message of peace, tolerance and justice continues to resonate nearly 46 years after his death.

"The bell is a call to let freedom ring as well as a call to action," said Marsha Joyner, a past president of the Martin Luther King Jr. Coalition Hawaii. "(King's) message wasn't just for people who look like me, but for everyone — especially in Hawaii, where we still have so much economic inequality. If we are going to achieve justice, we need to keep repeating that message over and over and over."

The ceremony at the Frank Fasi Civic Center Grounds at Honolulu Hale drew about 50 people and included performances by the Royal Hawaiian Band, Central Union Church's Youth on the Move choir, crystal singing-bowl musician Leigh Ann Phillips, Misty Kelai and others.

The Royal Hawaiian Band opened the program in fitting manner with renditions of "The Bells of Nagasaki" and Duke Ellington's "Come Sunday."

Among the featured speakers was Illinois state Rep. Byron Rushing, whose long history of civil rights activism included stints in the 1960s with the Congress of Racial Equality in New York and the Northern Student Movement in Boston. Rushing also served as president of the Museum of African American History in Boston.

"When we commemorate Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., we commemorate more than one great man, more than one race and more than one movement," Rushing said. "We commemorate all who found the strength to pursue peace, equality and justice."

Rushing then challenged the audience to take up King's struggle in the ways most relevant to them.

"Where do we fit in the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.?" he asked.

The program also included speeches by several local church and community leaders, including the Rev. Jonipher Kwong, pastor of First Unitarian Church of Honolulu. Kwong became one of the first to enter into a same-sex marriage in Hawaii when he wed Chris Nelson in November.

"I think Dr. King would have been very proud," Kwong said of the community effort that led to the passage of same-sex marriage legislation last year. "The bell-ringing is a call to keep Dr. King's dream alive."