

Students are Continuing MLK's Legacy of Non-Violent Resistance

Written by Azeem Hill

We gather here today to celebrate Doctor Martin Luther King Jr.'s massive impact on our society. He proved that nonviolence and the unarmed truth was the most effective reform strategy.

What unites us is the memory of a man and his dream. Look around you: we are his dream. We are united across color lines, neighborhoods, religious groups. Because, like Dr. King says "we all came here on different ships but we are in the same boat." We are a very diverse group. Look at the people around you. Isn't it beautiful to be in the presence of so many different people? Doctor King said, "At the center of non-violence stands the principle of love."

I think that if Dr. King were alive today, he would be outraged. His dream seems to be as much a reality today as his nightmares. Because even though we live in a more racially integrated time, people are still fighting each other. But people don't fight because they are bad; they fight because they are frustrated. They are frustrated because they are surrounded by systemic injustice.

I believe that my high school experience is surrounded by injustice and frustration. The Philadelphia School District suffers from a deadly dropout rate of 50%. That's extremely unjust. The incident at South Philadelphia High School is unjust. A school being set on fire by frustrated students is unjust. A student at MY school being slashed in the face with razor blades is unjust. Sayre high school students being called rioters and crack babies by the media and adults is unjust.

Doctor King said: A riot is the language of the unheard. So are we letting our students be heard? More importantly, are schools teaching our students to speak out? Is our administration encouraging our students to speak out?

I remember in 9th grade when my teacher asked my class "Who wants to go to college?" Over 80% of my class raised their hands. The rest of my class was interested in trade school. But now there are only about 15 students from my 9th grade class left when there were about 40 students originally. So the question is what happened to the rest of the students? Injustice happened. We need to ask ourselves if a class was originally full of students who want to go to college and somehow that population was cut in half, did those students drop out? Or were they pushed out after numerous suspensions and other disciplinary actions? That is proof of systemic violence.

DR. King said: "Law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and when they fail in this purpose they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress." Our social progress is indeed being blocked. I came into a high school system where 50% of the students drop out.

Until I joined PSU I didn't realize that there are public schools in Philadelphia that are peaceful. In this organization, students from all over the city have come together peacefully. That was a culture shock to me. The reason: we come together for a common goal and we identify the issues we face and get to the root causes of systemic inequality.

"Peace is not only the absence of tension, it is the presence of justice."

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Dr King said” We who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface what is hidden tension that is already alive.”

My tension is how I want my little brother and sister to be in a great school. I want them to be submerged in a school community where they push their mind to the limit day by day and learn how to be leaders.

So I want you to think about these kinds of schools and learn from the stories of the people who will be speaking today. Because a movement begins with the telling of untold stories. I want you to meet people’s negativity and stereotypes with courage and clarity. I want you to reject violence in your words, actions, and thoughts. I want you to bring your community together to indentify the root causes of nonviolence and injustice. And I want you to stand up against injustice. Will you stand with us? And now let us march together in unity so that our voices can be heard.

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