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News Release

For Immediate Release

Springfieldians share impact of MLK speech

50th anniversary celebration of "I Have a Dream Speech" and March on Washington event to offer Springfieldians opportunities for unity, understanding

(Event spokespeople will be available to media at the rehearsal, which will be 8-9 p.m. Tuesday on the Square.)

NAACP Springfield President Cheryl Clay was 10 years old when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. made his "I Have a Dream" speech during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on Aug. 28, 1963.

"Not many people had televisions at that time," she says, "so I didn't actually see footage of the speech or understand its significance until I was older."

Graduating from Central High School in 1970, Clay left Springfield and didn't return until about 10 years ago. She says Springfield has come a long way when it comes to race relations, but still has a ways to go.

"When I was growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, there were places in town where black people knew we weren't welcome," she says. "Today, (as NAACP president) I get complaints from people about how they've been treated at different establishments in Springfield, and this is 2013."

Clay is looking forward to celebrating this important anniversary in American history with her fellow Springfieldians Wednesday evening because it's about coming together to celebrate what she calls "the formal call for the end of racism."

Retired teacher Carolyn Hembree remembers hearing the "I Have a Dream" speech broadcast on Voice of America radio in Quito, Ecuador. Her husband, Jack, who was in the military, was stationed there at the time.

"I was thrilled to hear it. It was just remarkable – the cross section of America that turned out to hear him speak, the feelings of hope that we can make a better America," she says. "His ability as a speaker was just unequaled by anyone."

Hembree looks forward to Wednesday's event to both celebrate how far we've come as a nation and discuss how far we still have to go when it comes to diversity and race relations.

"Of course we'll be there," she says.

Former City Councilman Denny Whyne remembers watching the "I Have a Dream" speech from his home in Springfield, having just graduated from high school the previous spring. "I thought the Messiah had come," he says, about Dr. King's powerful words.

Whyne, who was involved in the civil rights movement himself, says he looks forward to attending Wednesday's celebration because of the fellowship and connection to others that comes from working toward the same goals.

"That's what Dr. King was trying to do – bring people together and build relationships. Out of those relationships, come opportunities for understanding," Whyne says.

Wednesday's activities will begin with a Unity March to Park Central Square beginning at 7:30 p.m. on the north side of the Martin Luther King Jr. Bridge, located in the 400 block of East Tampa Street. Parking is available at Jordan Valley Community Health Center and Municipal Court Building.

The march will travel south on Benton to St. Louis Street, then west on St. Louis to Park Central Square.

At the Square, Springfield Mayor Bob Stephens, City Manager Greg Burris and local faith leaders will offer perspectives of the Rev. (Dr.) Martin Luther King Jr.'s work and how it affects Springfieldians today.

Next, event participants will bury a time capsule under the monument on the southeast corner of the Square that memorializes the three African-American men - Horace Duncan, Fred Coker and Will Allen - who were murdered during a public lynching on the Square in 1906.

Immediately following, attendees will view the "I Have a Dream" speech in its approximate 15-minute entirety, on a mega-screen at approximately 8:30 p.m.

Burris says the event, presented by the Greater Springfield Race and Faith Collaborative, will kick off an entire year of focus on civil rights issues in Springfield.

"It is our intention to promote a common conversation within our community. And it is our intention to provide a toolbox of questions and activities that will focus on a different aspect of civil rights throughout the year. We intend to begin at the center ... and the center is you. And me. It's each of us," Burris says.

The Greater Springfield Race and Faith Collaborative started after more than a year of discussions among leaders of the Council of Churches, Missouri State University, Brentwood Christian Church and the City of Springfield.

Brentwood Christian Church's Rev. Phil Snider looks forward to Wednesday night because he wants his two sons, Sam and Eli, to see our community at its best.

"This milestone anniversary offers us a real opportunity to come together in unity, as one," he says.

Clay, Burris and Snider are among the lineup of speakers.

Other speakers include:

The Rev. Mark Struckhoff

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Dr. David Knox

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Greg Burris

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Mayor Bob Stephens

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M.W. Michael T. Johnson

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Rev. Phil Snider

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Springfield's 50th anniversary celebration of the "I Have a Dream" speech and the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom is presented by the Greater Springfield Race and Faith Collaborative. Event sponsors are:

- City of Springfield
- CoxHealth
- Community Partnership of the Ozarks
- Council of Churches of the Ozarks
- DNK Multimedia Studios
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- NAACP Springfield
- Oke-Thomas + Associates, Inc.
- Ozarks Technical Community College
- Springfield-Area Chamber of Commerce
- Springfield-Greene County Libraries
- Springfield Public Schools
- United Way of the Ozarks

For more information, or to arrange interviews before or immediately preceding the event, please contact sources directly, or call Melissa Haase at 417-864-1003 or 417-536-7648.

Resources (all PDF):

- [First person account of a local family's fight for civil rights, alongside the King family](#)
- [Springfield Event Map](#)
- [Outline of Events](#)