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Building a Bigger Table: Keeping the Dream alive

By Laura D. Hill

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More than 70 people gathered at Legacy Hall in James City County for the fifth annual Heal Greater Williamsburg/Heal the Nation Community Day in 2024.

On the heels of one of the most racially divisive national presidential elections, two local community events focused on keeping Rev. Martin Luther King's dream of racial healing, justice and equality alive!

On Saturday, November 9th, Let Freedom Ring Foundation held its 2024 Annual Fall Gala at the Virginia Ballroom of Williamsburg Lodge. The event celebrated descendants of [Historic First Baptist Church](#), one of the oldest Black congregations in the nation dating back to 1776.

It was fitting that a famous descendant, Martin Luther King III, son of civil rights icon Dr. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., addressed the roughly 700 attendees. King, a global human rights leader and author, spoke of the honor of ringing the historic Freedom Bell and seeing photographs of his father when he preached at First Baptist Church on June 26, 1962.



Martin Luther King III, son of the Civil Rights icon, speaks to attendees at the Let Freedom Ring gala on Nov. 9. Courtesy of Harry Washington.

The takeaway from King's remarks can be narrowed down to one sentence. "Yes we are potentially a great nation... but we must truly work to become that great nation that really is great for all of us." he said.

The next day more than 70 people gathered at Legacy Hall in James City County for the fifth annual Heal Greater Williamsburg/Heal the Nation Community Day organized by the Virginia Racial Healing Institute. The centerpiece of this community event, sponsored by Sentara Health, was a forum moderated by Rev. Fred Liggin.

The panelists included Rev. Dr. Carlon Lassiter of St. John Baptist Church, William and Mary Associate Professor Katherine Barko-Alva, Rabbi David Katz of Temple Beth El and Helen Casey Rutland of the Williamsburg Truth and Reconciliation Committee. Representing Jewish, Latino, African American and white communities they discussed the importance of diverse groups working together historically and today.

More than 60 years ago, Rev. King brought together a diverse coalition of leaders to heal of racial divisiveness. Jewish Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, stood with the Rev. King to advocate for civil rights to end racial injustices.

King dreamed of a "Beloved Community" where racial discrimination, hatred and poverty are overcome by creating a just and truthful society. While his dream still inspires millions of people today, the divisiveness of the presidential election has diminished hope.

We keep the dream alive by moving forward in a non-violent, unified manner that follows King's example. We must each ask ourselves "What can I do to make a difference?" What is my role in making the world a more just and equitable place for future generations?

We must recognize the recent progress made in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic and national social unrest due to the 2020 murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Amandla Aubrey. Millions of Americans marched in protest of racial injustices. More than 160 Confederate monuments were removed from public spaces, DEI

initiatives were launched nationwide and major health care, banking, philanthropic, business and government organizations acknowledged racial disparities and pledged to work towards equality.



Laura Hill and the Rev. Fred Liggin, board members of the Virginia Racial Healing Institute, with panelists at the Heal Greater Williamsburg/Heal the Nation community forum on Nov. 10. From left, Hill, Liggin, the Rev. Carlon Lassiter, Katherine Barka-Alva, Helen Casey-Rutland, Rabbi David Katz and Dr. Amber Price, president of Sentara Williamsburg Regional Medical Center. Courtesy of Harry Washington

Admittedly four years later, we are a nation standing at a crossroad. Wondering if 60 years of hard fought progress will be met with backlash? Will we follow the path of the Biblical Israelites, circling around the same proverbial mountain for another 40 years? Or will we live up to our potential of being a great nation for everyone?

The words of King's famous "I Have A Dream" speech are still a clarion call.

"Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy; now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice; now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood; now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children." — Rev. Martin Luther King

When we come together to build a more just and equitable community, we all win!

Laura D. Hill is the executive director of the Virginia Racial Healing Institute, which manages Coming to the Table-Historic Triangle. Learn more about her work at varacialhealinginstitute.org.