

**Board Chair Pete Sorenson**  
**What MLK Jr. Means To Lane County Speech**  
**January 13, 2009**

Welcome.... “Because the MLK birthday is a national holiday and government offices are closed, we thought we’d take a little time on our Board schedule to honor Dr. King and also hear from community leaders on the messages for which Dr. King is best known.”

We are taking time to recognize and honor a man who devoted his life to the fight for American civil rights. In his lifetime it is estimated Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered over 2500 speeches covering social, economic and political inequality. About himself he once observed, “In the quiet recesses of my heart, I am fundamentally a clergyman, a Baptist preacher.” Perhaps his religion as well as his race gave him insight to his brothers’ minds and hearts: allowing him to hear their pain at being excluded from the American Dream. He took his message from the pulpit to the streets, educating and exciting a nation; some ready – some not- to make room for the intentionally marginalized members of our society. He challenged Jim Crow laws through non-violent protests and called attention to our great nation’s legacy of oppression. He cried out against the miscarriage of justice when victims who were courageous enough to come forward were condemned instead of those who broke the laws themselves. He called for unity amongst all the disadvantaged and told us to welcome them into our neighborhoods and our hearts.

Dr King first reached into the homes of America through the pulpit. He raised his congregation’s consciousness of their ability to organize and take a stand against the injustices of segregation. His congregation was certainly not unaware of the social inequities but had not yet joined forces to demand equality as one voice. Integration gained momentum during the years Dr. King organized non-violent protesters. From labor unions to church groups the movement embodied integration and diversity – the young and elderly alike were encouraged to participate. Dr. King invited all of society’s disenfranchised and disempowered members to demonstrate and protest by his side. He worked against the class system. He taught us that poverty is a by-product of economic oppression and suppression of options. He stated that ghettos were a geopolitical tool used to limit access to options.

He opened our eyes and hearts to the beauty of inclusion instead of the safety of exclusion. JFK once said, “There are risks and costs to a program of action, but they are far less than the long-range risks and costs of comfortable inaction.” Dr. King helped our nation overcome a comfortable inertia so that all Americans could enjoy the American Dream.

On August 28<sup>th</sup>, 1963 he made history mobilizing thousands in the March on Washington. There, in front of a record number of individuals packed near the gazing pool Dr. King delivered his most famous speech, “I Have a Dream.” I grew up with the words to his speech deeply ingrained. “I have a dream that my four little children will

one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

I doubt there is a person in this audience today who has not heard his words and reflected on the meaning to be applied to their own lives. Dr. King’s legacy opened doors for all Americans, not just the African American. His message of tolerance and acceptance also allowed the underprivileged, the poor, the working man, and even white women to enter the workforce in numbers. As a father Dr. King wanted the best for his four little children but began by asking for the least; equality. I had the privilege of growing up accepted by the dominant culture and even I understand that as the *father of a daughter* I want equality and the same access I was afforded for my own little girl.

Dr. King’s movement laid the foundation for others to follow. Without his advocating for others we would know less about ourselves. Without his inspiration legions of Americans of Color would not have received the same quality of elementary education as their white counterparts. Those children would not have entered colleges nor qualified for professional positions instead of blue-collar jobs. We know education and access lead to financial equity. It has led us to the most electrifying political event in many peoples’ lives – the election of our first Black president.

In President Elect Barak Obama’s speech on race he says, “I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton’s Army during World War II and a white grandmother ... I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents, and for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible.”

Obama’s success is built upon the success of Dr. King’s Civil Rights movement – though it took a generation after his death for us to arrive here. His election does not signal the death of racism in our country nor County, but the example of how far our nation has travelled. The election of one man will not, by itself be enough to overcome the history that has given race its meaning in the United States. How many of us thought we would see a Black man elected President in our lifetime?

From “I Have a Dream” to “Yes We Can” our Country follows the trajectory of Dr. Martin Luther King’s dreams and ambitions. Our best goal is to stand united and choose to lead our community to say, “Yes, we did.”