

Showing Solidarity

West Bloomfield MLK events showcase community's diversity.

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United We Walk marchers return to West Bloomfield High School after their walk down Orchard Lake Road.
Staff photo by Angie Baan

Despite weather in the teens, close

to 300 people gathered Sunday, Jan. 17, for the annual United We Walk march of solidarity down Orchard Lake Road from West Bloomfield High School.

The 15th annual event honored the birthday of slain civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The program was moved to Sunday so people could participate in other activities on Monday, the official observance of King's birthday, which this year was designated a day of community service.

United We Walk, a group of adult and student volunteers, planned a full afternoon that included the walk; a program featuring West Bloomfield School District choirs, essay contest winners and local members of the famed Tuskegee Airmen, a famed group of pioneering black military pilots; breakout discussion sessions; and a candlelight vigil.

Hot chocolate and snacks in the cafeteria warmed the cold marchers. Their hearts were warmed by sharing a common purpose.

"We live in a very diverse community and every opportunity to get together in meaningful dialogue and honest exchange of ideas can do nothing but help in understanding each other," said Sallyjo Levine, a Temple Kol Ami member who headed the food committee for the event.

"This is not the way I grew up. I was in a segregated Jewish community. I didn't have the world our children have, and it's wonderful. Jews spent so many years in so many communities that didn't necessarily welcome them that we, of all people, need to be open to other religions and cultures.

"It's harder to hate and distrust other

cultures if you know them,” Levine said.

Others at the event remarked about the inauguration this week of Barack Obama, the first African American to be elected president of the United States.

“Martin Luther King wanted the blacks and whites to be equal,” said Seth Betman, 10, of West Bloomfield. “We’re fulfilling that with Obama now. Martin Luther King would be happy.”

His mother, Lisa Betman, added, “In King’s time, this never would have happened — how amazing.”

Evan Grossman-Lempert, 11, of West Bloomfield won the oratory contest for his age group. The sixth-grader at Abbott Middle School wrote on the theme, United We Live. With animated delivery, he spoke about his Odyssey of the Mind team at school and how he never really noticed that out of six kids, five different races were represented. He was the only Caucasian.

“We worked well as a team; that’s how I know we lived united,” he said. Later he added, “The more love you give away, the more you end up with.”

Dr. JoAnn Andrees, superintendent of West Bloomfield schools, stopped to congratulate Evan. She has been involved in United We Walk since its inception, and was given the group’s first Community Leader Recognition Award earlier in the day.

“I’m so proud of you,” she told Evan.

“Your message should be all of our messages.”

As the long afternoon program ended with the candlelight vigil led by Rabbi Norman Roman of Temple Kol Ami in West Bloomfield, the crowd had diminished in number, but not in spirit.

Walking outside with small lights in hand, the crowd formed a circle of solidarity and sang “We Shall Overcome” together.



Co-chairs David Henig and Sheryl Mitchell with food committee chair Sallyjo Levine.



Evan Grossman-Lempert, son of Marci Grossman and Mark Lempert of West Bloomfield, imparts a profound discovery from his winning essay.



Seth Warren and Seth Betman, both 10 and of West Bloomfield, participated in the walk.