

Lehigh News



Lehigh Community Reflects on ‘Give Us the Ballot’ to Honor MLK Legacy

Attendees gathered in the Zoellner Arts Center and joined via Zoom for the annual celebration.

Members of the Lehigh community gathered in person in the Zoellner Arts Center Butz Lobby and virtually by Zoom Friday for the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration Committee's annual event celebrating the slain civil rights leader's life and legacy.

The lunchtime gathering and dialogue focused on citizenship and its many meanings and was inspired by King's May 17, 1957 address, "Give Us the Ballot." Wandalyn Enix, professor emeritus at Montclair State University and Bethlehem City Council member, and Holona Ochs, director of Lehigh's Marcon Institute and associate professor of political science, were the event's featured speakers.

Christopher Burke, associate professor of psychology and co-chair of the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration Committee, welcomed attendees and gave a brief background on the committee's work and past speakers they brought to campus such as [Ibram X. Kendi](#), [Colson Whitehead](#) and [Anita Hill](#). But Burke said this event is always special.

This lunch is really a high point in the year for us when we can come together and really celebrate, Burke said.

Enix recalled what it was like to hear King speak in person, something she was able to experience on three separate occasions.

“Once you hear him speak, you never forget him,” Enix said.

She also discussed her place on a diverse Bethlehem City Council, one that currently has six female members. Enix stressed that while they don’t always all agree, they respect each other’s opinions.

While Enix is the first Black Bethlehem City Council member, she acknowledged that she was not the first Black elected official in the city and recognized those who helped create her opportunity by running for council, even though their campaigns were unsuccessful.

“I stand on the backs of my strong, hardworking, salt-of-the-earth parents, grandparents and great-grandparents,” Enix said. “And I stand on the backs of these influential community members who came before me.”

Just like Enix, Ochs also drew attention to women, but she focused on one at the beginning of her remarks —Coretta Scott King.

“Women are often written out of history,” Ochs said. “And Mrs. King, a lifelong human rights activist, was not only an integral part of the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, she is the architect of the King legacy.”

Despite her work, Ochs said Mrs. King’s birthplace, Alabama, still celebrates Robert E. Lee’s birthday on the same holiday as King’s, passed “an extensive set of anti-trans policies in 2022” and remains a place where the ongoing struggle for freedom continues.

She also discussed Martin Luther King’s “Give Us the Ballot” speech, touching upon his call for strong moral and courageous leadership and it being key to genuine equality.

Attendees also participated in roundtable discussions (or breakout rooms for those on Zoom) that included prompts such as “What does citizenship mean to you?” and “How do you think voting and citizenship are related?”

As the event wrapped up, Burke left those in attendance with one more topic to think about as they left.

“Dr. King said civil rights organizing for the right to vote injected a new meaning into the veins of civilization and gave new integrity and a new dimension of love to our civilization,” Burke said. “How can you as an individual living here and working here today ... take a step toward realizing that vision?”

STORY BY

[Stephen Gross](#)

PHOTOGRAPHY BY

Christa Neu

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