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Northampton schoolchildren celebrate MLK's life

By CATHERINE BAUM
Staff Writer

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NORTHAMPTON - R.K. Finn Ryan Road students sang "Happy Birthday," "Cumpleanos Feliz" and "Steen Rogdenia Teebia" Thursday to Martin Luther King Jr., who would have turned 81 today.

It seemed fitting they would sing the traditional song in English, Spanish, Russian and Portuguese, for King advocated fairness for all people everywhere, and at Ryan Road there are students who speak these languages in their homes.

"We really wish that Dr. King was still here with us today so we could sing Happy Birthday to him, but he had a dream and it's still alive in us," said Margaret Riddle, school principal.

Students drew posters, rehearsed poems, developed time lines and speeches, and memorized skits and songs of freedom for weeks in their own classrooms before Thursday's schoolwide celebration. They learned about the civil rights movement during their preparation.

"They're so used to having everything integrated; They haven't seen the discrimination I have growing up," said Ann Desmond, fourth-grade teacher. "I think it's great that it's so natural for them to include everyone."

When Desmond asked her students what King would have fought for today, she said they answered, the environment.

Students also learned about the civil rights movement Thursday through stories told by people who lived through it. In fact, guidance counselor William Owen said King personally visited his home. When Riddle announced this, schoolchildren lit up and said "What?" "What!" "Wow!" Teachers and staff put their hands up, which means it's time to be quiet. Students quickly hushed as they eagerly waited for Owen to talk about the man they've studied and admired for weeks.

"He wasn't famous then," Owen began. "He's famous now, but he wasn't then."

An elementary student at the time, Owen lived in Puerto Rico with his family. His father was director of the University of Puerto Rico, and King had approached him and various other universities to talk about civil rights and equality for everybody. Owen's father invited professors to a party he gave in his home for King.

"But I was in second grade and I had to go to bed early," Owen said. "So I didn't get to meet him, but he was in my house." Owen then proceeded to tell the same story in Spanish.

1 2 3 4



KATHLEEN DUNCAN

Students Blake Crowther, Jillian Laureano, Michael Tobin and Renee Lussier read a poem as part of the schools Martin Luther King Jr. birthday presentation.



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Michael Holroyde, a parent, also had a story to share. The British native was teaching in Gambia when one of his college students invited him to visit the student's West African village. It was January 1965. Holroyde floated down the Gambia River for eight hours and then walked for an hour through rice fields, bush and the jungle to get to the village.

He saw the huts made of mud and straw. There were no TVs, computers or radios. But there was a record of King's "I Have a Dream" speech the government shared with people. The student heard it and posted a photo of King in his room.

"He himself was interested in freedom," Holroyde said. "So my message is this: When you do good things - either by yourself or with your family and friends, either in your home, school or community - you have no idea where that good energy will end up. It could be thousands of miles away in a small village."

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