

Westchester Martin Luther King, Jr. Institute for Nonviolence

From 1988 to 2018: A BRIEF HISTORY

The arc of the Westchester Martin Luther King, Jr. Institute for Nonviolence over its first 30 years is one of growth and evolution towards the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's vision of the "Beloved Community." The MLK Institute was cultivated from urgent community conversations addressing racial injustice across Westchester County. We continue to lead Westchester communities in pursuing an ethic of nonviolence, inclusion and justice for all.

BEGINNINGS: MLK Institute's Genesis

In 1984, there was a nation-wide movement to commemorate Dr. King's legacy through establishing a national MLK holiday. The New York State Legislature asked activist and entertainer Harry Belafonte to head the statewide effort to establish NY's commemoration of Dr. King's birthday. Following the development of the NY MLK Commission, there were more substantial efforts to establish nonviolence as a way to address social conflict. In 1986, under the leadership of Governor Mario Cuomo, members of the NY State Legislature created a NY State Martin Luther King Jr. Institute for Nonviolence to serve NY residents through education and training, research and information services to promote nonviolent methods and skills. It was signed into law on August 1, 1988.

The Legislature invited municipalities to join in, and Westchester County did so. The late Honorable Lois T. Bronz organized several community conversations to address growing racist and anti-Semitic incidents in the County. They led to the establishment of a Westchester County branch of the MLK Institute, modeling the NY State MLK Institute for Nonviolence. Community leaders Yvonne Jones and Connie Hogarth joined Hon. Lois T. Bronz in establishing the Westchester MLK Institute. Other early members included Jacqueline Kittrell Tynes, Winston Ross, Daniel Woodard, Mickey Singesen, Ann Schaffer and Clarence Washington. In 1993, the Westchester MLK Institute became incorporated as a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization.

The Westchester MLK Institute began to teach Dr. King's ethic of nonviolence to adults and youth through forums, trainings, workshops and educational programs.

IN THE 1990s: Early Efforts at Education

The Westchester MLK Institute was first housed at Manhattanville College under the leadership of the late Hon. Lois T. Bronz and Yvonne Jones. The Institute saw its early work as promoting and facilitating the attitudes, skills and strategies of nonviolence as an approach to positive social change and the resolution of social conflict among the residents and institutions of Westchester County. It also began to develop programs to educate local communities on the relevance of Dr. King's teachings to current struggles for social justice and racial understanding. Early projects included the creation of programs and trainings related to expanding diversity and ending racism in schools and communities; and the creation of a comprehensive **Westchester County Directory of Human Rights Services**.

Spurred on by the Rodney King incident in 1991, MLKI initiated a focus on **police-community relations** and the excessive use of force by police. In February 1995, we presented a training conference at Manhattanville College with the participation of local police chiefs, entitled "Leadership, Commitment, Communities and Politics." The following year, it focused on promoting dialogue between local communities of color and law enforcement. These conferences were titled "Closing the Credibility Gap", reflecting ongoing skepticism and distrust on both sides.

In the late 1990's, we participated in the community organizing towards the creation of the **Westchester County Human Rights Commission**, which was successfully passed under the leadership of MLKI co-founder and legislator Hon. Lois T. Bronz, Legislator Andrea Stewart-Cousins and Legislator George Latimer.

By the end of the 1990's, the vision for a yearly training called "Ending Violence Building Hope" began to ignite among the MLKI board, staff and supporters.

IN THE 2000s: MLK Institute Grows in Vision and Scope

The impetus for initiating the **Ending Violence Building Hope** (or EVBH) annual conference series was to add substance and resolve to the local MLK Jr. holiday celebrations. The first EVBH conference was held in 2000 at Manhattanville College and was developed primarily for adults. In 2007, the program expanded to especially include students and young adults. This conference series has been held every year since 2000, and has grown steadily in community impact. Themes during this time period included "Walking the Talk: Nonviolent Workshops for Youth" and "Accountability," for young people and law enforcement professionals.

MLKI developed the **Fannie Lou Hamer Sister's Circle** as a leadership project for young women. Using the lives of women in the Civil Rights Movement as a backdrop, with civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer as the model, elder women in the Westchester community were invited to take part in the leadership development of girls aged 13-21 from underserved communities. The Sister's Circle provided a way for women to engage with young ladies through personal development, skill-building and social action. The Westchester Fund for Women and Girls generously sponsored this project, which ran for 2 years under Executive Director Stacey Bailey's imaginative leadership.

Stacy Bailey also initiated a new project for Manhattanville College students, called **A Different Drummer**. It brought students together during lunch to discuss the challenging issues of the day in order to explore controversial matters. This ran very successfully from 2002 to 2004.

In 2004, the **Interfaith Connection** and MLKI began collaborating on interfaith programs that continue to this day. The formation of the Interfaith Connection was inspired by Dr. King's "World House" statement from his 1967 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech:

"We have inherited a large house, a great "world house" in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu—a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace."

For several years we offered challenging small-group conversations on diverse topics related to areas of concern across our faith traditions. The highlight of our collaboration is an interfaith community concert held every year in early January to honor the legacy of Dr. King.

Also in 2004, the Institute relocated from Manhattanville College to Memorial United Methodist Church, thanks to the generosity of Rev. Joe Agne and the Memorial congregation.

Beginning in 2005, in response to the Iraq war and the US government's recruitment efforts, MLKI started **counter-military recruitment educational programs** in various high schools and churches throughout Westchester. Its purpose was to give youth a realistic picture of experience in the military so they could make informed choices when approached by recruiters. This project was done through the impetus and leadership of Executive Director Jill Sternberg. These counter-recruitment efforts were a very important and successful part of MLKI's mission to address the militarization Dr. King decried in his powerful 1967 speech "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence."

MLKI received a grant from the Elias Foundation in 2007 to fund a **musical education collaboration project with artist and educator Cornell Carelock, a.k.a. Lord Judah**. Through the project, MLKI and Lord Judah taught Dr. King's Six Principles of Nonviolence and Six Steps to Nonviolent Social Change to a group of youth in the hip-hop community. This core group of youth, H.I.P H.O.P (Highly Intelligent People Healing Our Planet), created music in response to their learnings about nonviolence and the Civil Rights Movement. One of their most notable works is "Still I Rise" (2012). This project was a great success and has spurred ongoing collaborations with Lord Judah and H.I.P H.O.P.

MLKI introduced **training and educational workshops for students and community members to specifically address race and inequality**.

- MLKI trainers used documentaries such as "A Force More Powerful" about the role of youth in the 1960s nonviolent lunch counter sit-ins in Nashville to provoke discussion among our youth.
- We also launched the **Peacemaking Center** in 2004. The Center held a well-attended program on race and racism at the Mt. Hope A.M.E. Zion Church in White Plains in 2006. The event was led by the MLKI Board Co-Chair Rev. Odinga Maddox. Ongoing gatherings introduced several people to MLKI who still serve as volunteers.
- In 2008, we sponsored a "Healing of Memories Workshop," led by Father Michael Lapsley of South Africa who had done extensive work in the areas of truth and reconciliation and healing, both personally and publicly. The workshop was held at Good Counsel Academy and was powerful and transformative.

FOR THE COMMUNITY: The MLK Freedom Library

On January 20, 2008, we launched a free lending library called the MLK Freedom Library located at Memorial United Methodist Church in White Plains. This library was the long-standing vision of Yvonne Jones, one of MLKI's founders, and was established by Barbara Mair and Jacqueline Tynes. The Library's mission is "to educate local communities on the life and times of Dr. King and other peacemakers, on the struggles for racial and social justice, and to serve as a vital resource center for people of all ages and cultures through its collection of fiction and non-fiction materials." The Library currently has over 3,000 books and other media related to topics on the African Diaspora, American slavery, Civil Rights Movement, social justice, peacemaking, nonviolence and African American history and culture. In 2012, the Thomas H. Slater Center in White Plains generously offered the library a larger space on its 2nd floor, where it remains a significant resource to the community.

In 2011 the MLK Freedom Library held its first **MLK Day Book Fair** at the Barnes and Noble bookstore in the White Plains City Center. The Book Fairs offer a variety of musical and educational events, and an opportunity to meet and learn from authors who have written on topics related to civil rights, human rights, African American history and culture for children and adults. The Book Fairs also help raise funds and awareness for the library. The Book Fair has become a popular annual MLK Day event with families returning year after year to celebrate Dr. King's Birthday through education, music and fun activities. The Westchester Alumnae chapter of the Delta Sigma Phi Sorority selected the Library Book Fair as their annual MLK Day of Service project beginning in 2017.

Also in 2011, the Library and the White Plains-Greenburgh chapter of the NAACP collaborated on a project honoring the late Dr. Errol D. Collymore, an important White Plains civil rights pioneer. Upon completion of the project, the Library was proud to include a public presentation on Dr. Collymore at their MLK Day Book Fair in 2012.

The MLK Freedom Library has held **many special events to highlight important books and writings** including collaboration with the Westchester County Human Rights Commission highlighting Dr. King's "Letter From a Birmingham Jail." Library committee members have held book discussions on "Cane" by author Jean Toomer and on Michelle Alexander's "The New Jim Crow," and a conversation on the life and times of Malcolm X.

In 2015, the Library began offering monthly after school programs for the White Plains Youth Bureau, homeschooling groups, the Zeta Phi Beta Sorority youth auxiliary and other youth groups. Programs have included topics such as African masks, the Children's March of Birmingham, poetry by Sonia Sanchez, Egyptian art, and Kwanzaa.

The Library participates in the annual White Plains National Night Out and the White Plains Juneteenth celebrations, and sponsors community Poetry Open Mic Nights. It has been lovingly staffed over the years by Jacqueline Tynes, Cora Miles, Barbara Mair, Dawn Patterson, Bill Johnson, Tom Kissner, Beverly Swift, Nia Bolton and many other volunteers.

THE PRESENT: Deepening Our Focus

MLK Institute entered the current decade with a deeper commitment to address racism directly in Westchester County.

After the tragic police-related killing of Kenneth Chamberlain, Sr. in White Plains in November 2011, MLKI became one of the founding members of the **Westchester Coalition for Police Reform (WCPR)**. MLKI remains one of the key organizations involved in the work of the Coalition, which includes organizing vigils, conversations with law enforcement and public officials, and community forums.

MLKI presented the **Created Equal series** at the invitation of the Greenburgh Public Library in 2014. We presented two provocative documentaries: "Slavery by Another Name" with Prof. James Jones of Manhattanville College as moderator, and "The Freedom Riders," with discussion led by community leader Luvaghn Brown.

In 2016, MLKI sharpened the purpose for EVBH conferences, intentionally focusing on providing skills and tools for youth to choose alternatives to violence. In 2017, the EVBH conference changed venues and met at Calvary Baptist Church in White Plains. They have been very successful, drawing between 200 to 250 youth from across Westchester County, with several churches, youth leadership programs, youth shelters and high school clubs in attendance.

Conceived by the Board of Directors as a way to honor those who embody the ethic of nonviolence and recognize the impact of their community work, the **Celebration of Champions Awards Dinner** has become an annual highlight for the social justice community in Westchester. The first Celebration of Champions was held in 2010, and it has become a way for us to connect to local activists and advocates for social justice. MLKI has been proud to award over 27 individuals and organizations to date as Champions in our community.

Embracing our vision to create safe spaces and to encourage courageous conversations, MLKI began holding quarterly **Beloved Community Dinner** gatherings in 2015. Introduced by then Executive Director Doris K. Dalton, these gatherings are a way to build communities around the ethic of compassion and inclusion while exploring solutions for community challenges. In January 2017, Beloved Community Dinners began gathering monthly to address urgent concerns around rising overt white supremacy, hate speech, and the need for civil dialogue. Currently, the Dinners partner with Memorial United Methodist Church to extend a loving welcome to women returning from incarceration who participate in the "Coming Home" project.

MLKI's interfaith collaborations expanded, working closely with the American Muslim Women Association (AMWA) and the Westchester-Fairfield American Jewish Committee (AJC) on programs, special events and educational forums.

We began 2018 with the goal to help individuals develop tools to address racism. The EVBH conference in February 2018 equipped youth to engage in public discussions around racism, bigotry, implicit bias and stereotypes. MLKI also co-sponsored and organized a powerful Undoing Racism© training for community leaders and organizers in April 2018.

MLKI has participated in **legislative advocacy and local and national protests**, including the fight for fair and affordable housing in Westchester, transparency in local government leadership, law enforcement accountability, gun control, abolishing solitary confinement and environmental justice. We were the fiscal sponsors for the Rockland County and Westchester County youth-led demonstrations in the "March for Our Lives" campaign in March 2018. We were proud to lend our experience, knowledge and mentoring to youth activists for march leadership and organizing.

THE FUTURE and the Next Thirty Years

In Fall 2017, the MLKI Board adopted a new mission statement: "to advance racial equity in all our communities by educating youth and adults in nonviolent activism for justice." In reflecting upon the 50th anniversary of Dr. King's assassination, and the 30 years of the MLK Institute, we agreed on the necessity to adjust our paradigm in order to faithfully meet the challenges of systemic racism. Our work has been fruitful, but it has not brought the most vulnerable in our communities closer to Dr. King's vision of "The Beloved Community." We are re-dedicated to the goal of racial equity within the larger framework of racial justice while continuing to educate, advocate and build communities committed to the ethics of nonviolence, inclusion and compassion.

We have already begun moving towards our mission: our EVBH conference in February 2018 empowered youth to engage in public discussions around racism, bigotry, implicit bias and stereotypes. MLKI also co-sponsored and organized a powerful Undoing Racism© training for community leaders and organizers in April 2018.

The goal of our work is to create safe spaces in our communities that empower youth and adults, and support inclusiveness, courage and peace. Through collaborative relationships, we will advocate for justice, equity and shared power for all. Our work increases awareness about

violence in our communities and the power of using nonviolent alternatives.

We are at the opening of a new chapter, our next thirty years. Together with community leaders, partner organizations and people committed to the vision of a Beloved Community, we will continue to bend the arc toward justice.

“When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds of despair, and when our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a creative force in this universe, working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil, a power that is able to make a way out of no way and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.”

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., addressed to the SCLC on Aug. 16th, 1967