

For one school, holiday was a 'day on'

NORWALK

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There were no classes Monday, yet 11-year-old Elveret Thomas arrived at West Rocks Middle School ready to learn on the 25th anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.

Thomas and his family were among the crowd of Norwalk residents that filled the auditorium -- decorated with hand-drawn portraits of the civil rights icon -- for a family-oriented celebration of King's life and legacy, sponsored by Norwalk Public Schools.

The event featured musical performances by students from West Rocks and Brookside Elementary School; a proclamation from the mayor; a brief awards ceremony to recognize the George Washington Carver Community, A.C.H.I.E.V.E. and The Courage to Speak Foundation (www.couragetospeak.org); and keynote remarks from Gwen Edwards, the host of "Our Lives" on CT News Channel 12.

It also included workshops for children and adults that revolved around the late reverend's accomplishments and asked community members how they could sustain his vision in today's world.

"It is our hope that you will reflect upon what you are doing to fulfill the dream and will consider taking on new roles in this community to create a Norwalk community that works for all residents," said Lynne Moore, the principal of the school.

Billed as "a day on, not off," the celebration drew a crowd that spanned generations. There was 66-year-old Relford Palmer, who remembered when King was assassinated, and 11-year-old Thomas, who read about that day in class. Three-year-old Tonya St. Surin attended the event with her cousin, Eve St. Surin, 18, who has gone every year since middle school.

"I wanted to show her the tradition," she said. "Dr. King's legacy represents opportunity. He gave me the chance to be whatever I want to be."

Palmer called the strong attendance of young people "encouraging," especially when they could have been home for the holiday.

"It would give Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks and Mrs. King great pride to see their work continued today," Palmer said.

So, too, were young people involved with the ceremony. Brookside students yielded standing ovations for their vocal performances, for instance, and two eighth-grade boys from West Rocks -- Alexandro Ramos and Lucas Schwartz -- recited slam poetry about the civil rights movement.

Public officials addressed the crowd, too, urging public service and social responsibility in a city that Mayor Richard Moccia dubbed "a beautiful mosaic of different people who work well together." The chief of Norwalk Public Schools told community members that education -- a priority for King -- remained a key to changing society for the better.

"We need to close the achievement gap, ensure that students stay in school and prepare them for college," Superintendent Susan Marks said.

Following that line of thought, Edwards encouraged children and teenagers to "be good students who get better." That's what King did, she said.

During her keynote speech, the talk-show host detailed the way that King went from earning Cs in public speaking to prompting milestone legislation that protected disenfranchised Americans and, as a "preacher's preacher," translating the philosophies of Mahatma Gandhi into peaceful resistance that trademarked the Civil Rights Movement.

"Part of Dr. King's legacy," Edward said, "was that he never gave up despite the constant risk to his personal safety."

That message resonated with Thomas, he said.

"He stood up for what was right without fighting," he said, "for all people to get respect."