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'The man who had the dream': BG shows out for MLK march

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Hundreds of people packed State Street Baptist Church on Monday for the march. They marched from the Warren County Justice Center to the church for the annual Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Service. **Below:** Ryan Dearbone gives the purpose statement at the church.

PHOTOS BY JOE IMEL /joemel@bgdailynews.com

An overcast, cold morning couldn't stop hundreds in Bowling Green from celebrating the life and legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. on Monday.

A throng of community members and leaders, led by an ensemble of Black Male Scholars and Jonesville Academy students, marched their way from the Warren County Justice Center to the steps of State Street Baptist Church.

The marching group was peppered with the vibrant blue of Phi Beta Sigma jackets. Verses of gospel standards like "We Shall Overcome" echoed off the pavement as the energized crowd made its way through downtown.

It was the first march put on by Bowling Green's MLK Planning Committee since 2020, returning after a pandemic-induced hiatus.

Ryan Dearbone, president of the Warren County-Bowling Green NAACP and member of the committee, said he marches because MLK's dream still has not been achieved. The young Black students present Monday morning could be the generation to carry it out.

"Know that it has not been achieved yet, and know that they could be the generation that changes it for everybody," Dearbone said. "They could be the generation that makes sure that Breonna (Taylor) doesn't happen again, that George (Floyd) doesn't happen again – that there is accountability for those who want to discriminate against us."

Dearbone said until that accountability is there, “we have to come out every year, we have to celebrate the man who had the dream, who laid out the blueprint for us to follow.”

Robert Darden said he attended the festivities to celebrate his son Lewis, a Black Male Scholar and sixth grader at Bowling Green Junior High School.

Darden moved to Bowling Green 17 years ago and said that there isn't any city like it, referring to it as a melting pot.

“We already made a change,” Darden said, gesturing to the multi-racial makeup of the crowd wrapping around State Street Baptist.

Darden, 63, said the attitude around MLK marches and celebrations was more hostile back in his youth. But because MLK put himself on the “front line” of the Civil Rights Movement, dying for the cause, he marched on.

“We knew someone was going to get beat up,” Darden said. “We didn't care.”

Filling up each and every pew, the MLK Day crowd was treated to musical performances by the Rev. Brian Hogg and the Alpha Baptist Church Choir. Stacy Spencer, senior pastor of New Direction Church in Memphis, Tennessee, served as the day's keynote speaker, delivering an impassioned and fiery message.

“There are some people who are threatened by your freedom. There are some people who are threatened by your advancement,” Spencer said. “ ... Whenever someone has benefited from your oppression, you best believe they are going to do everything they can to keep you from advancing.”

The MLK Planning Board also presented Jonesville Academy students and the Black Male Scholars with humanitarian awards.

“These young faces, these young men, these young women, the ones who haven’t been born yet – they are the legacy,” Dearbone said, recognizing the students. “They are the dream.”

The Black Male Scholars program offers mentoring and curriculum taught through a Black lens to sixth and seventh graders at Bowling Green Junior High School. Jonesville Academy is for Black, Hispanic and multiracial boys from grades 3-8.

Dearbone said the young generation that packed the front aisles of the church “is our purpose.”

“Thank you for living the purpose. Thank you for being part of the dream,” Dearbone said. “But the work’s not done.”