



Obama presidency seen in King's footsteps

BY DWIGHT R. WORLEY
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Sitting with a group of black men at a New Rochelle church, Joseph Williams laid out his hope for Barack Obama's presidency.

It's a thought many shared: that the man who tomorrow will become the country's first black president continue the unfinished work of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

"I know he's everybody's president," said Williams, 46, principal of Daniel Webster Elementary School in New Rochelle. "But he's more attuned than someone who is not from this race to the atrocities that black people have experienced."

For many, Obama's inauguration coming on the heels of the King holiday is almost prophetic, a passing of the torch to a man they feel will carry on the legacy of the slain civil rights leader.

In Obama, supporters see the evolution of many of King's ideas on war, economic justice, human rights and education. His election is a step in realizing King's dream of racial equality and advancing human rights, said Randolph McLaughlin, a civil rights attorney and law professor at Pace University.

"I think King was trying to usher in a day when African-Americans would have a seat at the table just as everyone else does," McLaughlin said. "There's a direct line between what King did and where Obama stands."

If Obama's policies do follow the goals of King, Joel Berg, executive director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger, expects the president-elect to begin where King left off - promoting economic equality.

In his last months, King was planning the Poor People's Campaign, which sought remedies to widespread poverty.

Berg, who is originally from Spring Valley, is pleased with Obama's insistence on using economic stimulus funds to help homeowners, not just banks. He also said Obama's commitment to end child hunger by 2015 shows his dedication to eradicating poverty.

"If they even come close to doing that, they will very aptly be carrying on Dr. King's legacy," he said.

Jim Killoran, executive director of Habitat for Humanity of Westchester, said one area where Obama is sure to follow King is in his calls for increased voluntarism.

King once said in a speech, "If you want to be important, wonderful. If you want to be recognized, wonderful. If you want to be great, wonderful. But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant."

Obama and Gen. Colin Powell today plan to ask Americans to make a continuing commitment to community service. Obama has also proposed tax credits to encourage students to volunteer.

"When times are tough, it's an opportunity for people to shine and help each other," said Killoran, whose group will paint the Mount Vernon YMCA today as part of its annual King holiday Build-A-Thon.

At Bethesda Baptist Church on Friday, where Williams, the school principal, and 75 black men and boys gathered to discuss Obama's presidency, many said the immediate impact would be to change the perceptions of black men.

Kevin Powell, an activist and the keynote speaker at the "Black and Male In America" meeting, said Obama would balance negative depictions of blacks that have endured for centuries.

"For the last two years, we have had this positive image every single day on national TV of a black man in a way we haven't seen since, in my opinion, Dr. King ... and all those brothers back in the 1960s," said Powell, who lost a bid for a Brooklyn congressional seat last year. "He's countering, single-handedly, every negative image we've been digesting."

And as King inspired a generation of activists, so will Obama serve as a role model for millions, said Angela Campbell, executive director of Academic Pathways in New Rochelle. She said she already has seen a change in the 34 students in her after-school program, with several choosing to study Abraham Lincoln, whom Obama admires, and others lining up for the program's community service assignments.

Campbell said that five years ago, most black males in the program aspired to be athletes and rappers; now most want to pursue careers in government and science.

"There's a light inside of them," Campbell said. "I can see the growth and I can see the change in them."

Roy Johnson, a magazine editor and a trustee of Bethesda Baptist, said Obama opened up new possibilities for black boys and girls.

"For most of our lives, the most famous black male has been an athlete or musician," Johnson said. "In November, that changed overnight."

King also championed integrated schools to ensure an adequate education for all children, said Judith Johnson, superintendent of Peekskill schools.

Like many in government, Obama has pushed for policies to address inequities in education: tying teacher pay to performance and expanding early childhood education. But Johnson said he doesn't have to follow King to make an impact.

"While he is certainly going to carry on the values and grand principles espoused by Dr. King, I don't think we should hold him accountable just for Dr. King's dreams. He has his own dreams," said Johnson, who met with legislators and members of Obama's transition team last week in Washington to discuss education reforms. "We all know the civil rights movement was never completed. But it's the next generation. He's building on what was started."

Julie Carran, co-chairwoman of the Westchester Martin Luther King Jr. Institute for Nonviolence, is skeptical that Obama will be able to follow King's footsteps in all areas.

"He's a politician," she said. "He's going to need to make a lot of compromises, and it's going to be up to us to hold his feet to the fire."

Perhaps, but change, even Obama's hope-filled variety, will take time, McLaughlin said. However, he knows - as certainly does Obama - that expectations are high.

"King said change is a process. It's a long process," McLaughlin said. "It takes steps, not leaps."

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