

Celebrating the legacy of Dr. King

Today, as we celebrate the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr., we can take true pride that we as a community have come far in reconciling the pain endured by our African-American forebears. But our work is not over. Let us not fool ourselves either into believing we have reached a post-racial society, for we have not — not yet.

It is apt that on this day of all days we announce with great joy that Portsmouth's African Burying Ground Committee has passed the crucial \$1 million mark in its efforts to raise funds for a memorial to the city's African ancestors. Most of us know the story by now, that just over a decade ago the remains of 13 Africans were found buried under Chestnut Street. They are among more than 200, mostly slaves, who are buried in the area of Court Street and beyond — the outskirts of the city during slave-holding times. Since that discovery in 2003, a group of Seacoast residents, black and white, has worked tirelessly to raise \$1.2 million for a proper memorial park to honor the men and women interred at this "Negro burying yard."

And it is certainly not lost on us, nor should it be to any of our readers, that many of the contributors to the park are not of African descent. We harken to the words of George Carlisle, owner of Olde Port Properties and an early and generous supporter of the burying ground memorial. He said in August 2011, "We can't go back 300 years and undo what was done. But we can make a decision as to whether or not it stops or continues. This cause speaks more about who we are today than 300 years ago. Do we leave them there or give them their dignity?"

Those words have reverberated with countless contributors, with the owners of every single business on Chestnut Street who pledged \$10,000 each toward the memorial, with students at Portsmouth High School who held fund-raisers for the park, with the board of directors of the Land and Community Heritage Investment Program, which awarded a \$57,508 grant, and with many others. The committee now finds itself a mere \$200,000 from its goal, and members hope to raise those funds in the next few months in anticipation of a possible spring construction date.

It is important on this day of all days to honor the Seacoast Martin Luther King Coalition, which celebrates its 25th anniversary year. The coalition was created by Nathaniel Holloway to advocate that New Hampshire recognize today as Martin Luther King Jr. Day. While the federal government created the day in 1983, to be followed by virtually every other state in the country, it was not until May 1999, that New Hampshire followed suit. It is appropriate today to honor the work of the coalition. It is because of it, and African-Americans throughout the state, that we today officially honor the Rev. King in the Granite State.

It is also important today to understand that while we have come far, we have not come far enough. We consider the words of longtime Greenland African-American resident Thea Griggs, who was profiled yesterday in Seacoast Sunday. She talks about being questioned by a local police officer when she was stopped because her car had a taillight out, of being unable to buy wine ostensibly because she had her 14-year-old son with her. Were they racially motivated incidents? She doesn't know, but she said she has spent years brushing off "subtleties" that heighten her racial awareness.

The Rev. Dr. Arthur Hilson of New Hope Baptist Church talks of watching a woman pick up her purse after he sat on a bench nearby. Holloway talks of being ignored at a store, of being followed. These stories come not out of an inner city, but out of the Seacoast.

We leave you with some oft-repeated words of Dr. King, words that are nonetheless worth hearing once more — for in them is the key to our collective future. "I look to a day when people will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."

Happy birthday, Rev. King.