

Events punctuate effectiveness of King's message

Weather can't dampen tributes to King

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Veronica Bence took a moment to reflect after stepping off the stage inside Pittsburg's Creative Arts Building with her fellow dancers from East County Kids N Motion during Monday's event commemorating the life and legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.

"You know, if it wasn't for Dr. King, we wouldn't be able to perform on the stage and do our thing," the 16-year-old Pittsburg girl, who is white, told several of her fellow dancers, who are black, while trying to catch her breath.

Several Contra Costa County communities held events Monday to reflect on the civil rights icon and keep his message of equality alive.

Dozens huddled underneath jackets and Windbreakers and below Pittsburg City Hall's eaves for a rally, and then broke out their umbrellas for the march to the Creative Arts Building. The marchers' spirits were not dampened by Monday's storm, as many sang songs such as "We Shall Overcome," waved signs and encouraged drivers to honk their horns in solidarity.

"We had a few people who didn't turn out because of the weather, but it really wasn't bad," said the Rev. Greg Osorio, one of the event's organizers. "We had it easy compared to the marches during the time of the Civil Rights Movement. We didn't have to deal with dogs or fire hoses."

King played a pivotal role in ending segregation before he was shot and killed April 4, 1968, in Memphis, Tenn., while leaving a motel. In 1983, President Ronald Reagan signed a bill that created a federal holiday to honor him.

A march planned in El Cerrito on Monday morning was canceled because of bad weather, but a few hundred residents came to El Cerrito High School for the city's celebration of Martin Luther King Jr.

Day. Participants honored King through song, dance, prayer and speeches by local and state politicians, school officials and students.

The event's theme was "Owning the Dream, Making it Personal," and speakers during the program asked the audience to do their part in fulfilling King's vision.

"It means remembering each day that the way you live your life affects the world," El Cerrito High School Principal Jason Reimann said.

About 200 people came Monday afternoon to Antioch High School's Beede Auditorium for the city and school district's joint program honoring King. The event began with a film of King's iconic speech, followed by remarks by a bevy of elected officials, including Rep. John Garamendi, D-Walnut Grove; state Sen. Mark DeSaulnier, D-Concord; Contra Costa Supervisor Federal Glover; and Antioch Mayor Jim Davis.

Glover, the first African-American elected to the county's Board of Supervisors, implored the crowd not to rest on the successes of King and other civil rights leaders but to work toward positions — teachers, politicians, police officers — that can effect change.

"We cannot be satisfied with dreaming," he said. "We cannot be satisfied with hoping."

Keynote speaker Barbara Ewing, a former Antioch principal, recounted her experience working with King during the Civil Rights Movement.

"I can speak from personal experience that he was all the you've said today he was," she said. "He was all that and more."

Grace Bible Fellowship's boys praise group W.E.M.I.M.E. danced its worship, as did 13-year-old Nikala Duncan with her interpretation of the gospel song "Never Could Have Made It." The event also featured performances by winners of a scholarship contest that asked youths to answer the question, "What is your dream?"

Across the Bay, a group of about 50 participants waited at the Caltrain station in San Mateo for the Freedom Train from San Jose to San Francisco, which for the past 26 years has commemorated King's life and work.

San Carlos resident Denise Cassidy said she brought her three children to the event — BJ, 8, John Ryan, 6, and Rose, 4 — to teach them that

this is not just a holiday. She said her parents were civil rights activists who marched in Selma, Ala., with King and imparted their experience on her. She is trying to do the same for her children.

"My husband and I are trying to raise our children to remember Martin Luther King," she said.