

## Celebrate King's Life by Eradicating Poverty

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Claims of statues weeping have always been intriguing. Wouldn't it be startling if the magnificent statue of Martin Luther King Jr. in Washington, D.C., was seen shedding tears? Indeed, if such phenomenon were possible, the Rev. King's statue would be brought to tears by the level of poverty today.

While visiting the town of Marks, Mississippi, in 1968, Dr. King uncharacteristically broke into tears. He began weeping as he watched a teacher feeding schoolchildren their lunch, consisting only of a slice of apple and some crackers. All of the children were underweight, "a condition that lent a special poignancy to their enormous eyes." With tears streaming down his cheek, King had to leave the room.

Seeing the poverty among children in Mississippi, Martin Luther King began preparing to lead the Poor People's Campaign in Washington, D.C. This fight to "Outlaw Poverty" was the last to which King devoted himself. Just days before his assassination, he proclaimed, "The curse of poverty has no justification in our age ... The time has come for us to civilize ourselves by the total, direct and immediate abolition of poverty."

Though King was assassinated before the Poor People's March took place, on May 12, 1968, Coretta Scott King and several black ministers led thousands of people in a march in Washington, D.C. The Poor People's Campaign marked the first time that Congress heard actual testimony from the poor.

King would be disheartened to see that today, 44 years after his death, poverty is spreading at record levels and is entrenched across all races. For half a decade, the percentage of Americans living below the poverty line has increased each year, from 12.3 percent in 2006 to 15.1 percent in 2010.

The Census Bureau released its analysis of U.S. poverty in 2011, and the official poverty rate was 15 percent. Over 46.2 million people — the largest number counted as poor in 53 years of

poverty measurements — live below the poverty line. About 20.5 million Americans, or 6.7 percent of the U.S. population, make up the poorest poor, defined as those at 50 percent or less of the official poverty level.

Worse, record levels of children — 16.1 million — continue to live in poverty in 2011. Children under age five suffer the most: one in four infants, toddlers and preschoolers were poor. Almost half of those children lived in extreme poverty.

Record numbers of women are living in poverty. More than 17 million women lived in poverty last year, compared with 12.6 million men. Nearly 44 percent of poor women (7.5 million) lived in extreme poverty, the highest ever recorded. The poverty rate for single mothers who head households rose from 38.5 percent in 2009 to 40.7 percent in 2010.

Based on the 2011 Census Bureau American Community Survey, South Carolina's poverty rate of 18.9 percent was the ninth highest in the U.S. and significantly higher than the national rate of 15.9 percent. Demographics of poor children in South Carolina are staggering: 17 percent of white children, 38 percent of black children and 38 percent of Hispanic children live in poor families.

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that in 2010, 15.4 percent of Greenville County residents were living in poverty. The rate of children in poverty was even higher with 21 percent of children in Greenville County living in poverty.

Let's celebrate Martin Luther King's birthday this year by taking up his challenge to rid our nation and the world of poverty. As King said, "There is nothing new about poverty. What is new is that we now have the techniques and the resources to get rid of poverty. The real question is whether we have the will."

The first step in "outlawing poverty" is educating ourselves on poverty. Myths abound, such as the poor don't work and don't want to work. Most of the children in poverty have parents who work, but low wages and unstable employment leave their families struggling.

Nikki Giovanni, the keynote speaker for the Martin Luther King Diversity Banquet to be held this year on Thursday, Jan. 17, at the Hyatt Regency, knows first-hand about poverty. She frequently quotes King in her presentations, especially King's sermon "Fierce Urgency of Now."

King said, "We are now faced with the fact, my friends, that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time."

Martin Luther King would weep at the thought we would spend 44 years procrastinating. Now is the time to take aggressive action to eradicate poverty.

For information on the 2013 Martin Luther King Diversity Banquet, go to <http://www.mlkdreamweekend.com/diversity-banquet/>.