

Hundreds honor civil rights leader's legacy at MLK awards breakfast

BY STEVEN MAYER smayer@bakersfield.com

Jan 20, 2025

1 of 21

< >



Keynote speaker Allen Thigpen, CEO We Are Game, delivers remarks.

Rod Thornburg / For The Californian

About 500 people came together at the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Community Awards Breakfast held Monday morning to celebrate the late civil rights icon for his wisdom, leadership and sacrifice.

Held for the first time at the Bakersfield College Renegade Event Center, the breakfast featured a keynote speaker and other guests, and honored several local individuals for their community service and personal achievements.

Organized by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference of Kern County and a committee of local volunteers, the event was packed with a multicultural, multiracial crowd, including dozens of local dignitaries and elected officials.

"We will make sure that everyone in Kern County has access to education, and it's education that brings freedom," Bakersfield College President Jerry Fliger said in his welcome.

"We will make sure that everyone in this community knows that there is a way up and a way out," he said.

Mistress of Ceremonies NaTasha Johnson, founder of Upside Production Management, handled the morning's busy agenda alongside Sunni Crawford, chairman of the Leadership Conference.

In his opening prayer, Church of God Pastor Traco Matthews noted that the theme of this year's awards breakfast began with the words "Mission Possible."

Matthews asked God "to protect the freedoms that we usually enjoy in our nation and right here in Bakersfield, California."

He asked that justice be protected from harm and that democracy continue to provide representative government for all.

"And we will do this all in the spirit of nonviolence, in the spirit of unity, in the spirit of principled combat, even when we have differing ideas on how to get to the Promised Land," he said.

After a catered breakfast buffet, Bakersfield Mayor Karen Goh went before the mic to proclaim Jan. 20, 2025 as "Dr. Martin Luther King Day in our city."

Directly following, Kern Community College District Chancellor Steven Bloomberg spoke to the hundreds listening about what Dr. King means to him.

"Dr. King was about one word with two letters, and that's 'we,'" Bloomberg said.

"And it's always 'we' over 'me,' and if you watch Dr. King and what he did and what he stood for, it was always about 'we.'"

Bloomberg recalled the history of King's arrest in Alabama in the early 1960s for leading a peaceful protest against segregation. It was in that jail cell that King wrote the famous Letter from Birmingham Jail.

"As we gather to honor Dr. King's legacy today, I am reminded, I hope you will be, too, of his profound words," Bloomberg said.

"'Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice,' ladies and gentlemen, 'everywhere.'"

The new leader of the college district said we all have a "shared responsibility" to confront injustice, not only in institutional settings but in our neighborhoods, schools and homes.

Injustice "can appear as a neighbor being marginalized, a child in our schools being bullied, or a family struggling to access basic services and resources," he said.

As a community, Bloomberg said, we must be proactive in recognizing and responding to injustice. We must speak out against discrimination and ensure everyone has an equal opportunity to thrive.

Keynote speaker Allen Thigpen spoke with passion about the nonprofit he cofounded designed to help young, gifted athletes reach their potential, a potential that often is not to be found in athletics.

"I was raised by two amazing strong Black parents," Thigpen told the gathering. "And by the way, there are tons of them out there.

"We were taught you have to work twice as hard and be twice as good to get half the recognition your counterpart does," he said.

As a Black American, remembering your history is imperative, Thigpen advised.

"Just as Jewish parents won't let their kids forget the Holocaust, we must not let our past be forgotten."

The winners of this year's MLK Awards are:

- Ajay Anand, entrepreneur, co-founder and CEO of Centric Healthcare services

- Ucedrah Osby, founder and executive director of Community Interventions, founder of the Bakersfield chapter of All of Us or None, and co-founder of Sister Warrior Freedom Coalition

- Glenda Woolfolk, president, No Sister Left Behind Inc.

- Trinidad Sierra Jr., Soldiers for Christ Ministries

- Mothers Against Gang Violence

- Katherine Jordan, aka, Grandma Whoople, retired from a career in education in 2013 to focus on a citywide anti-bullying campaign.

- Jay Tamsi, president and CEO of Kern County Hispanic Chamber of Commerce

Student awards: Trevor Turner, College Youth Award

- Katie Johnson, College Youth Award

- Ishmeet Singh, Statewide Advocate Youth Award

Reporter Steven Mayer can be reached at 661-395-7353.