In The News

Speaker points to MLK’s ‘dream come alive’

Idelia Smith can remember a Kansas City with trains that had whites-only sections.

“I grew up in a segregated America,” said Smith, the keynote speaker Jan. 17 at the annual Martin Luther King Jr. breakfast sponsored by the Greater Holyoke Council for Human Understanding.

During her speech, Smith, assistant vice president of academic affairs at Holyoke Community College, showed slides that included those from the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on Aug. 28, 1963.

“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character,” Smith said, quoting the speech.

She has watched the drive toward realizing King’s dream, she said. But racism institutionalized in pillars of society such as the media and education means that reaching the goal remains elusive.

“I will never see it fully realized because it takes time to dismantle what we’ve done,” she said. “It’s a horrible legacy in America. And we’re working on it, but I won’t see it fully realized and neither will any of you. Neither will your children.”

That’s because of the belief instilled that people who are different were “those other people, people from the other tribe,” she said.

Still, she said, she doesn’t believe in “race.”

“I belong to the human race,” Smith said.

She showed other slides, including photos of this year’s early slate of Democratic presidential candidates that included black U.S. senators. Some people like herself will see the photos of black presidential candidates and President Obama and remain struck at the advances, she said.

But younger people regard such photos as normal, she said.

“I love that it’s normal for you,” Smith said.

A photo of U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y., drew applause from many in the room, including members of the Holyoke High School Madrigal Singers, who performed at the event.

“It’s going to take people like this to become representatives in Washington to change legislation, to change approaches and how we view our world, not only for people of color but for women and everyone, because we’re not there yet,” Smith said.

Originally from Minnesota, Smith came to Holyoke in 1982. She was one of only four persons of color at the college then, she said.

Now, Christina Royal is not only the first woman to be president of HCC, but the first person of color to be president of HCC. And more than 25 percent of HCC’s students are now Latinx, she said, using a gender-neutral term for Latinos.

“It’s glorious; it’s wonderful,” Smith said.

She showed slides of black pop stars Lil Nas X on the cover of Time magazine and Lizzo in Elle.

“So what’s changed?” Smith said.

“Everything, everything. This is Dr. King’s dream come alive, every day, all the time. We’re not perfect, we have a long way to go, but I see it, I experience it.”

This article was written by Mike Plaisance for Holyoke Community College.