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HCC reflects on King's legacy

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 at the Summit View Banquet and Meeting House in Holyoke. The event was 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 Election Night 2008 when Barack Obama was elected as America's first black president.

"That was a huge moment, and that was Dr. King's dream come alive," Smith said.

There's far to go but also much to celebrate toward achieving King's dream of equality, of judging people by character and not skin color, she said.

"I've watched the evolution



Idelia Smith gives the keynote speech at the Martin Luther King Jr. breakfast on Jan. 17 at the Summit View Banquet and Meeting House in Holyoke, sponsored by the Greater Holyoke Council of Human Understanding. (HOLYOKE COMMUNITY COLLEGE PHOTO)

of civil rights and the change in my world," Smith said.

Smith, who lives in Shutesbury, addressed nearly 100 people at the annual breakfast, which was held at the Summit View Banquet House in advance of the Martin Luther King Jr. national holiday on Jan. 20.

The mission of the nonprofit Greater Holyoke Council for Human Understanding is to foster relations through educational and humanitarian projects within the greater Holyoke community. Originally from Minnesota, Smith started working at HCC in 1982 in the Cooperative Education & Career Development Department. Her membership on and work with the Affirmative Action Committee led to her appointment as the

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Idelia Smith, assistant vice president of Academic Affairs, Holyoke Community College

college's affirmative action officer. A subsequent expansion of her duties to include Title IX led to the additional title of assistant vice president of diversity. She is a recipient of the governor's "Pride in Performance Award" as an outstanding Massachusetts employee and was recognized by the city of Springfield as one of the 25 most prominent African-American women serving her community.

King, a clergyman and civil rights leader, was assassinated April 4, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee at the age of 39. He would have been 91 on Jan. 15.

Smith urged people who had never heard King's "I have a dream" speech to watch the event on YouTube. King delivered the remarks at 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," she said, quoting the speech.

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

"I will never see it fully re-

alized 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 of 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.

She showed a slide of U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y. The photo of the politician popularly known as AOC drew applause from many in the room including members of the Holyoke High School Madrigal Singers, who performed at the event.



Attending the annual Martin Luther King Jr. breakfast Jan. 17 at the Summit View Banquet and Meeting House in Holyoke are Holyoke Community College alumni and Greater Holyoke Council for Human Understanding board members, from left, state Rep. Aaron Vega, Gina Nelson, Jeffery Anderson-Burgos and Nelson Lopez. (HOLYOKE COMMUNITY COLLEGE PHOTO)