

## Honoring the life, legacy and leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Born on January 15, 1929, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. created a legacy of hope and healing in America. His efforts toward progress and harmony have paved the way for interracial and intercultural coordination and involvement today. The United States Department of Justice Community Relations Service (CRS), which was established under Title X of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and its purview expanded under the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr., Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009, commemorates this holiday as it honors the work of a man who braved persecution and had a global impact through his empowering voice and leadership. Throughout its history, CRS has championed Dr. King's inspiring dream of a vibrant, all-embracing nation unified in justice, peace, and reconciliation. CRS, also known as "America's Peacemaker," is the only Federal government agency charged with the responsibility of bringing racial conflicts to peaceful resolutions.

Since its creation in 1964, CRS has worked to rectify civil rights disputes and respond to conflicts that poison communities and prohibit society from reaching its full potential. Former CRS Southeastern Regional Director Dr. Ozell Sutton (Sutton) marched on the frontline with Dr. King and hundreds of thousands of others in the historic March on Washington, which drew attention to the continuous adversities and discrimination faced by African Americans a century after emancipation.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, Dr. Sutton worked with Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to orchestrate the Poor People's Campaign — an effort to gain economic justice for poor people in the United States. Together, their efforts resulted in over 3,000 people from across the country gathering to occupy approximately 15 acres of the National Mall near the mall's Reflecting Pool, which became known as "Resurrection City."<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Sutton, who also conciliated racial tensions during the Memphis sanitation workers strike in April 1968, was staying at the Lorraine Motel when Dr. King stepped onto the balcony and was assassinated.<sup>3</sup> Dr. Sutton called Attorney General Ramsey Clark that evening to inform him of the horrendous event, then addressed the crowd that had congregated expecting to hear Dr. King speak.<sup>4</sup> Former CRS Research Director Dr. James Laue (Laue) was also at the Lorraine Motel and was the first person to come to Dr. King's aid.<sup>5</sup> Like Dr. Sutton, Dr. Laue was deeply involved with the Civil Rights movement, working closely with Dr. King, the SCLC, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to defuse escalating racial tensions and prevent

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1. University of Colorado. (1999, August 17) *Ozell Sutton*. Retrieved from URL [http://www.civilrightsmediation.org/interviews/Ozell\\_Sutton.shtml](http://www.civilrightsmediation.org/interviews/Ozell_Sutton.shtml).
  2. (1993) *United States Community Relations Service Annual Report*. Pp. 5.
  3. CRS Powerpoint. Slide 7.
  4. United States Department of Justice Community Relations Service. (2015, October 30) *Assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Subsequent Riots*
  5. Levine, Bertram J. (2005) *Resolving Racial Conflict: The Community Relations Service and Civil Rights, 1964-1989*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press. Pp. 121-123/239.
  6. George Mason University: School of Conflict Analysis and Resolution. *James Laue*. Retrieved from URL <https://activity.scar.gmu.edu/people/james-laue>.
  7. Melanson, Phillip H. (1994) *The Martin Luther King Assassination: New Revelations on the Conspiracy & Cover-up 1968-91*. S.P.I. Books. Pp. 92.
  8. National Park Service. (2016, May 2) *Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial*. Retrieved from URL <https://www.nps.gov/mlkm/learn/quotations.htm>

violence during church “kneel-ins,” lunch counter sit-ins, and protests.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Dr. Laue pioneered the United States’ first doctoral program in conflict resolution at George Mason University — where he became the first Vernon M. and Minnie I. Lynch Professor of Conflict Resolution.<sup>7</sup>

CRS assists communities in resolving disputes, disagreements, or difficulties relating to discriminatory practices based on race, color, national origin, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, and disability through conciliation, meditation, facilitation and education. With its unique mission, CRS remains committed to achieving Dr. King’s vision of peaceful relations among communities. As Dr. King said, “We must come to see that the end we seek is a society at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience.”<sup>8</sup> We are called on this holiday, not merely to show reverence, but to celebrate the values of equality and fortitude Dr. King so compellingly expressed in his boundless vision for America.

Dr. King said he wanted to be remembered as a “drum major for justice.”<sup>8</sup> In remembrance of this historical day, CRS staff laid a wreath at the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial in Washington, D.C., followed by a moment of silence. CRS Deputy Director Gerri Ratliff and General Counsel Antoinette Barksdale then shared remarks and read *Standing Tall*, a poem by Jamie McKenzie. CRS encourages all Americans to observe the Martin Luther King, Jr., Federal Holiday on January 18, 2018 with appropriate civic, community, and service activities in honor of Dr. King's life and legacy.