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King fought for economic justice, daughter stresses

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By Deborah M. Todd, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The Rev. Bernice King was well aware that most people who attended Westmoreland County Community College's Black History Month celebration were familiar with her father's legendary "I Have a Dream" speech.

She made it a point to emphasize that her father -- and the civil rights movement as a whole -- were far greater than a single moment in Washington, D.C.

"I don't want the history of what my parents sacrificed and so many others to be watered down to an 'I Have a Dream' speech," said the daughter of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. She is an elder with New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Lithonia, Ga.

More than 750 people packed the college's Founders Hall gymnasium Tuesday for the program, "To Whom Much is Given, Much is Expected." It was sponsored by WCCC, Seton Hill University and Saint Vincent College.

As part of what she called a "history lesson," the Rev. King encouraged guests to read her father's speeches and texts to get a better idea of where he had hoped to lead the civil rights movement -- an idea, she said, that is quite different from what is espoused in popular culture.

"The truth is, our father wasn't assassinated because he was standing up for issues of racial injustice. He was assassinated because he was dealing with the issue of economic injustice in this country," she said, adding that "poverty, racism and militarism" were the three civil rights issues her father was most concerned with addressing.

The Rev. King discussed historic turning points associated with her father, such as when blacks overwhelmingly voted Democratic for the first time after Robert Kennedy intervened to help get Martin Luther King out of jail in 1960. But she also focused on the integral role played by her mother, Coretta Scott King.

She said Mrs. King refused to leave her home after it was bombed in 1956 and said she "didn't marry just a man" but "a mission of the man."

"Don't talk about Dr. King in isolation of Coretta," she said.

The Rev. King also paid homage to the few thousand dedicated individuals of all races who were willing to risk their lives to take part in the civil rights movement. She said those selfless acts saved the South from inevitable racial turmoil; saved the country from what she said could have been a second civil war; and left a legacy of nonviolent civil disobedience for the world to follow.

"This movement was categorized as a civil rights movement, but in many respects, it was much more than a civil rights movement," she said. "It was a freedom movement and a spiritual movement. Not only were laws changed, hearts were changed."

Officials from all three campuses said they were glad they decided to collaborate for the program because they believed that their combined resources, along with grants from the Community Foundation and United Way of Westmoreland County, would allow them to bring in a high-profile speaker.

Jarrell Burnett, 22, a Seton Hill senior from Edgewood, Md., said he was grateful for the program because it was the most diverse event he had taken part in during his four years in Westmoreland County.

"I feel like we're starting a change," he said. "We have a black president and now, here. I don't know what they had done before in Westmoreland County, but they're bringing a historic figure to speak to us."

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Kiv Jzinger, president of the Community Foundation for Westmoreland County, said it was critical to the future of the county to bring diverse figures to the region.

"If we are committed to increasing the quality of life in Westmoreland County," he said, "diversity is a major factor."

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