

Speaking out for unity

NA man to read a King sermon at city program

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Joshua Brittingham, who goes by the name Joshua 2 professionally, will read a sermon originally delivered by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during a municipal program to commemorate King's birthday today at Attleboro City Hall. (Staff photo by Martin Gavin)

NORTH ATTLEBORO - One of Martin Luther King Jr.'s short sermons will be read in Attleboro today by a North Attleboro artist once jailed while fighting for equality.

Joshua Brittingham - "Joshua 2," professionally - was a leader of the black student union while at the University of Delaware.

There, he said, "Once, I was put in jail to 'protect' me from a gang of people who attacked me."

"Most memorable, though, was probably the moment when I spoke to a large group of students who were involved in the cause against racism," said Brittingham, who now runs Dark Horse Designs, an arts firm.

"It wasn't just blacks who were being discriminated against, but also gays and lesbians, and people of Arab descent. The group had begun to be divided, and this was hurting the cause. I spoke of Martin Luther King Jr. and his message of non-violence, and this helped to unify us again."

Brittingham will read one of King's short sermons, "A Knock at Midnight," during the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Committee of Greater Attleboro's 23rd annual celebration, which will start at 1 p.m. with a municipal program at Attleboro city hall.

Local and state representatives, as well as Brittingham, will speak.

An interfaith service will follow at 2 p.m. at Centenary United Methodist Church, 39 North Main St., Attleboro.

A Delaware native, Brittingham, 48, is the grandson of a pastor in the Mt. Zion Holy Church. The church is affiliated with the Mt. Sinai Holy Church of America, which, he said, "was founded on the principle of equality between women and men."

Brittingham said he remains a human rights advocate "in the way I live my everyday life."

"It is a way of being in the world," said Brittingham, who moved to North Attleboro 2 1/2 years ago. He and his wife have two children.

"Many people like to think that after the civil rights act was passed that racism sort of went away. People have a tendency to think that in 1980 and 1990, and even now that it doesn't really exist. It does exist; it just shows up in different forms, as it has throughout the history of time."

This interview was conducted by e-mail.

SUN CHRONICLE: You read Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech here in Attleboro at the Attleboro Arts Museum's poetry slam last January. And you're reading his "A Knock at Midnight" sermon during today's King Day event. Which of Dr. King's writings resonates with you the most, and why?

JOSHUA BRITTINGHAM: I don't really have a favorite.

King's messages are all so powerful because he is speaking about all people and the fact that we are all inextricably bound to one another. Because of this, the meaning of his words is as true today as when he spoke them, and the meaning will continue to endure.

They are messages we cannot afford to forget.

I have great respect and appreciation for his intelligence and the way that he incorporated writings and ideas from philosophy, psychology, theology, ancient mystics, and many other broad areas of life and history.

SC: What message do you hope the audience gleans from hearing "A Knock at Midnight"?

BRITTINGHAM: Like all of King's speeches, the messages are timeless and apply as much today as when he spoke them.

My adaptation of his speech will contain references to issues of today, and it is amazing to realize the parallels.

I hope that people will understand that a deeper examination of one's own life and our collective life is critical if we are to fulfill our human potential. This was at the core of King's work, and it is more relevant today than ever.

SC: To what extent do you encounter discrimination in the Attleboro area?

BRITTINGHAM: Discrimination is a human condition, be it an action of great severity or small in context. And we as a people must be aware of our actions.

If our actions do not lend themselves to a greater good, then our actions must be examined.

I do see discrimination in this area. I've seen it in every city and state I've ever lived in. In this area, I see it more as discrimination among socio-economic classes - it is clearly divided in this respect.

As far as citizens of color are concerned, we seem to be understood more as an invasion of sorts into a culture that has not had the opportunity to be a part of an assortment of different cultures. When people refuse to allow any kind of change or growth to occur, the society is often subject to this type of mentality. This does not lead to a greater good.

What I try to do in respect to this is inquire with people about their reactions and statements. One of two things happens. Either there is a refusal to have a conversation, or a conversation occurs and we are both better for it.

SC: What can local youths do to further promote equality?

BRITTINGHAM: The local youths will not be able to further promote equality unless they see equality in the world around them. They want equality - it is a desire of every human being.

However, many interactions I've had with local youths have all been basically one statement: despair about their lives.

The fortunate ones can leave and go to college. The rest are trying to figure out what they can do amid this despair.

This town needs to show more compassion, develop more programs, and be more caring so that the youths feel as though they have a chance in this world. Instead, they are often treated with suspicion and intimidation.

This cannot continue if the local youths are going to bring equality to the future. There needs to be a different approach to inspire hope among youths.

SC: How does your civil rights work influence your art?

BRITTINGHAM: The influence of civil rights, equality, compassion, and understanding is in everything I try to do.

From my paintings of an Anjou pear to my most recent work, "The Paradox of Liberty," all are expressions of the same message: beauty, goodness, nature, kindness, and love to all people, regardless of race, creed, color or religion.

My art is about the human existence and the work we must constantly do to evolve to a higher level of ourselves.

Civil rights work by nature must confront and challenge people's thought patterns and is not always understood. Sadly, I experienced this at the recent unveiling of "The Paradox of Liberty," which drew a large crowd but ultimately resulted in the painting being removed from public view because of negative reactions.

In the art world, much of my work is considered "conceptual expressionism," which means that I am expressing through my paintings various concepts about life and humanity. I see civil rights as an essential part of all human life.

I have a painting called "Amalgamation" which will be on display at the Attleboro Arts Museum as part of the "Celebrating Diversity" exhibit, which opens next month with an artist reception on Feb. 27.

SC: Your portfolio ranges from decorative furnishings to fruit. What's your favorite genre to create in?

BRITTINGHAM: I don't have a favorite; I feel I am guided by a higher calling to create in whatever medium is most appropriate for the message.

I am an artist first and foremost. In many ways, I feel very blessed to be able to explore a wide range of artistic expression.