

NEWS



Tyson Jones, 11, won the 2025 VyStar Tomorrow's Leaders Elementary School Essay contest. Tyson, a fifth-grader at Biscayne Elementary Leadership Academy, says that with time, kindness and confidence people can achieve anything. Tyson was awarded a check by VyStar Credit Union's Kemal Gasper and Michelle D. Hare on Friday, January 17, 2025. | Will Brown, Jacksonville Today

Jacksonville reflections on King's legacy, Trump's inauguration

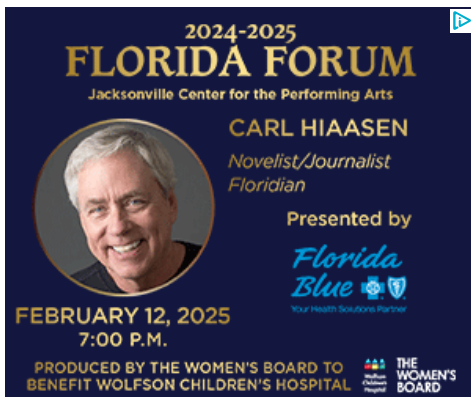
By Will Brown

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Jacksonville's 44th annual Martin Luther King Jr. Grand Parade was supposed to end on Monday at nearly the same time that President Donald Trump placed his hand on the Bible to become the 47th president in Washington, D.C.

Instead, the bitter cold postponed the annual MLK Day parade until February but did not dissuade volunteers from participating in a day of service, where they beautified portions of Arlington. Visitors also prayed for peace at the Cummer Museum, which hosted its own King programming for the seventh straight year.



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Twelve-year-old Cameron Burch (left) performs with other Jacksonville Arts & Music School students at the Cummer Museum on Jan. 20, 2025. "When I think of (Martin Luther King), I think of a leader, a peacemaker, a change agent," said Burch, whose parents Jeremy and Markeishya Wallace watched with pride. "He led so many people to peace. He inspired hope." | Will Brown,

Jacksonville Today

In Duval County, where Trump earned 49.9% of the vote — his highest percentage in his three presidential races — local Republicans held their own version of an inaugural ball Monday evening, hours after more than 100 protesters staged an anti-Trump demonstration in front of the Duval County Courthouse.



Nearly 100 people gather for an anti-Trump rally in front of the Duval County Courthouse on Jan. 20, 2025. The Jacksonville

Community Action Committee and other organizations organized the rally. | Michelle Corum, Jacksonville Today

It wasn't lost on some that the U.S. was simultaneously celebrating a man who championed an equitable society at the same time it inaugurated a president whose words have targeted groups including Black and Latino immigrants and Asians.



Rodney L. Hurst talks about how Jacksonville-native James Weldon Johnson wrote "Lift Every Voice and Sing" was written in a dark period in American history and served as a beacon for oppressed people at the city's MLK Breakfast on Jan. 17, 2025. | Will

Brown, Jacksonville Today

“Many people use the King holiday as a crutch and say, ‘I’m not racist. I attended the King breakfast. I’m not racist, I attended a NAACP luncheon.’ But your actions speak louder than anything else,” local civil rights activist and Black historian Rodney Hurst said earlier this month. “If you really want to talk about what Dr. Martin Luther King stood for, then show some semblance of equality and fairness. Don’t milk one day out of the year, and the other 364 days, it’s business as usual.”

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Celebrating Trump

The last time the Martin Luther King holiday coincided with a presidential inauguration was in 1997. Then-President Bill Clinton repeatedly mentioned the slain preacher in his remarks. Clinton noted that a revolution in civil rights had extended the circle of citizenship and expanded opportunities for women.

Trump acknowledged King's legacy in Monday's inaugural address as he mentioned the electoral gains he achieved with Black and Hispanic voters.

"We set records and I will not forget it," Trump said. "I've heard your voices in the campaign and I look forward to working with you in the years to come. Today is Martin Luther King Day and in his honor, this will be a great honor. But in his honor we will strive together to make his dream a reality. We will make his dream come true."

Trump also pledged to provide hope, prosperity, safety and peace for American citizens regardless of their race, religion or color.

"This week, I will also end the government policy of trying to socially engineer race and gender into every aspect of public and private life," Trump said. "We will forge a society that is colorblind and merit-based."

Shamari Lewis, the president of the Duval County Coalition of Black Republicans, had planned to spend Monday in Washington D.C. for the inauguration before the weather forced him to cancel those plans.

Lewis said the Martin Luther King holiday coinciding with the presidential inauguration is fitting.

"To me, it is a clear signal that this president is the most befitting president for this moment in the American experience," Lewis said. "(Not only for) the leadership ability, but his communication. His ability to communicate with the everyday American to get a point across, to connect and inspire movements. Whatever direction that may be, he has the ability to do it."

Lewis said King and Trump are adept at motivating people through oratory and mastery of mass media, with Trump using his skill to “purge the bureaucratic corruption.”

On Monday evening, a few hundred people reveled in Trump’s return to the Oval Office at Jacksonville’s Southbank Hotel. The group included Duval County School Board members, congressional candidates, policy thought-leaders and Black, white and brown members of the Duval County GOP.



Duval County School Board member Tony Ricardo toasts to President Donald Trump at the First Coast Inaugural Ball on

Monday, Jan. 20, 2025. | Will Brown, Jacksonville Today

Duval GOP Chairman and former Jacksonville City Council candidate Charles Barr noted that Trump’s efforts to engage with racial minorities, working-class people and young voters paid dividends at the polls. He said the local party is committed to further engagement with local minority groups during his two-year tenure as chairman. Barr said the party purchased a table at Friday’s MLK breakfast and plans to participate in the Grand Parade.

“If we are going to reach out to the community, we have to be seen. We want to get the Duval Republican name out there. Saying you want to reach out and doing nothing is hypocrisy,” Barr said.



Charles Barr is the chairman of the Duval GOP. He says the party plans to engage with racial minorities and other groups during his two-year tenure as the local chairman. | Will Brown, Jacksonville Today

‘Failing miserably’?

Earlier this month, Hurst, the 80-year-old local civil rights icon who was bloodied and beaten during Ax Handle Saturday, said we have an obligation to ensure King did not die in vain. He believes Florida and the country are “failing miserably.”

Hurst believes we are at a place where Black and white people don’t want to say things that make each other feel uncomfortable.

“So, they don’t talk about racism. They don’t talk about issues as it relates to Black history and banning Black books. They don’t talk about what happens and is happening in the educational arena, what happens in jobs, and what happens in a university system where university professors are afraid to talk about Black history,” he said. “So, when that does not happen, how do you go to a Martin Luther King breakfast expecting equality, fairness and a level playing field when your actions prove that’s not what you want to do?”

Hurst was among the speakers at the city of Jacksonville’s 38th Martin Luther King Jr. Breakfast Friday at the Prime Osborn Convention Center.

He reminded an audience of more than 2,000 people that Jacksonville native James Weldon Johnson's poem "Lift Every Voice and Sing," known as the Black national anthem, served as a beacon for oppressed people during a dark period in American history.

Multiple speakers at Friday's breakfast said there is more work ahead.

"We are experiencing the second Reconstruction period in our country," Jacksonville NAACP President Isaiah Rumlin said Friday morning. "The economy, racial justice, homelessness, voter suppression, even previously broken promises from consolidation in Jacksonville, these issues are still ahead of us and are difficult."

Friday's breakfast's keynote speaker Jonathan Eig said King viewed his activism as an outgrowth of his ministry. Eig's biography, *King: A Life*, won a Pulitzer Prize last year.



Jonathan Eig won a Pulitzer Prize for his 2023 biography about Martin Luther King Jr. Eig provided the keynote address during the 38th Martin Luther King Jr. breakfast at the Prime Osborn Convention Center in Jacksonville on Jan. 17, 2025. | Will

Brown, Jacksonville Today

Eig said the Federal Bureau of Investigation labeled King as "dangerous" within 36 hours after his address at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

“Throughout all American history, every time we have made progress on race, we face a backlash,” Eig said, using King’s “I Have a Dream” speech and Barack Obama’s election as examples.

The backlash from Obama becoming America’s first Black president, Eig says, was evident “in future elections.”

Public sentiment turned on King during the 1960s. In May 1963, months before his most famous speech, King had a 41% favorable rating. By August 1964, weeks after he was arrested in St. Augustine, King’s favorable rating was 44%. By 1966, it fell again to 33%.

“He did not have exceptionally high approval ratings among white Americans. They were quite low,” says University of Arkansas history Professor Candace Cunningham. “It’s important to understand that Dr. King was really a preacher first. ...He understood the people he was speaking to were angry. And he needed to be able to express that anger too, and to try to find a way to get people to use that anger for activism.”

Cunningham, whose work focuses on 20th century African-American history, argues that race relations in the U.S. are a pendulum that swings between progress and regression. She believes we are in a period of regression.

She says Trump’s words echo those of elected officials prior to the Civil Rights Movement.

“What people are reacting to now is the way in which these words, this language, is becoming normalized again,” Cunningham says. “I think that’s what’s scaring people more so than the idea that this has never happened before – it has – is something happening again, being normalized again, that is what some of the fear and anger and anxiety people are having.”

Differing views of MLK

Today, more than 90% of Americans have a favorable opinion of King.

Jacksonville resident and politically conservative podcaster Quisha King is not one of them. King — no relation to Martin Luther King — says his legacy has taken “the progress of Black Americans and set us back centuries.”

In his final public speech, Martin Luther King asked America to “be true to what you said on paper” in terms of giving all people equal opportunity to achieve. Asked whether Jacksonville had achieved that, King replied in an email to *Jacksonville Today*: “Jacksonville is certainly not where other large cities are culturally. But we are headed in that direction. We have too much focus on one’s identity rather than merit. The more we focus on identity the more we move away from our Constitution.”

Three decades before he was elected to the Jacksonville City Council, Rahman Johnson won the Tomorrow’s Leaders essay contest at the city’s Martin Luther King breakfast.

“Martin Luther King always talks about the hope of tomorrow,” Johnson told *Jacksonville Today* last week. “Dr. King had the foresight to look beyond what he saw to see the possibility of what was.”



Kynlei Gibbs, a freshman at Riverside High School; Diego Muñoz, a seventh grade student at Westview K-8 and Tyson Jones, a fifth grade student at Biscayne Elementary Leadership Academy, were the winners of the 2025 VyStar Credit Union Tomorrow’s Leaders competition. They were celebrated during the 38th Martin Luther King breakfast at the Prime Osborn Convention

One of this year's winners, Kynlei Gibbs, 14, dreams of becoming a lawyer because she's passionate about ensuring people have access to equality and justice.

In her winning poem, "What Happens Next," Kynlei alludes to children killed in Palestine, Southern lynchings and how lies lead people to believe her brown skin is a threat.

"All it takes is one individual to make something right," she wrote.

As Kynlei's poem was read, Johnson sat at a table with four other members of the City Council and smiled.



Kynlei Gibbs hugs VyStar Credit Union Senior VP of Culture and Belonging Michelle D. Hare during Jacksonville's 38th Martin Luther King Jr. breakfast at the Prime Osborn Convention Center on Jan. 17, 2025. Kynlei won the Tomorrow's Leaders high school poetry competition with her poem "What Happens Next?" | Will Brown, Jacksonville Today

While Trump has said and done what Johnson called "some egregious things," he said, "We don't have the luxury to be mad at the person who holds the office. Our job as Americans is to be vigilant. It's to ensure the system of checks and balances works. Our job as Americans is to make sure we are doing our part to ensure democracy."

Johnson says King's dream for an equitable society has yet to be achieved in Jacksonville, decades after more investment in the urban core was one of the promises of Jacksonville's consolidation in 1968.

But there is recent progress.

Mayor Donna Deegan has pushed her administration to study revitalization in Durkeeville and has launched a pilot program to help homebuyers with downpayment assistance as part of fulfilling her campaign pledge to lift up all neighborhoods and communities in Jacksonville. In September, the Jacksonville City Council approved s \$150 million Community Benefits Agreement that guarantees \$40 million of those dollars will be earmarked for the Eastside.



Martin Luther King biographer Jonathan Eig, left, shares a laugh with Community Foundation of Northeast Florida President Isaiah Oliver during the 38th Martin Luther King Breakfast at the Prime Osborn Convention Center on Jan. 17, 2025. | Will Brown, Jacksonville Today

King's "dream" demanded that America "make real the promises of democracy," his biographer Eig said on Friday.

"It didn't occur to me when I wrote the book that his final words were 'Ok, I will,'" Eig said. "Even the things King fought for and won are under attack: Voting rights are under attack; Black history is under attack; economic inequality is growing. ...When I consider

these words and these actions, I believe – and I encourage you to feel – that we can make a difference.”

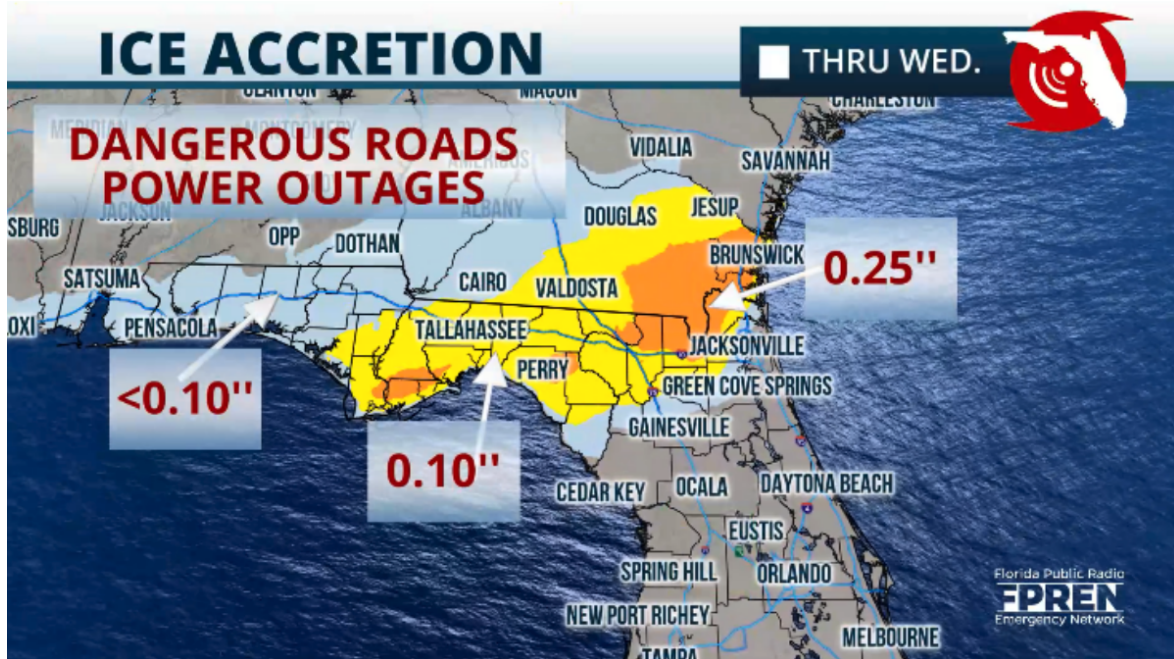


Will Brown

Reporter

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Will Brown is a corps member with Report for America, a national service program that places journalists into local newsrooms. He previously reported for the *Jacksonville Business Journal*. And before that, he spent more than a decade as a sports reporter at *The St. Augustine Record*, *Victoria (Texas) Advocate* and the *Tallahassee Democrat*. Reach him at will@jaxtoday.org.



NEWS

Historic winter storm heads toward Florida

By *Irene Sans - Storm Center*

A winter storm is expected to bring historic amounts of snow and other winter precipitation across the Gulf Coast states and possibly even along the immediate coast. Snow is forecast across the Florida Panhandle from Pensacola to Jacksonville and Gainesville. Snowfall will vary, but it will be a rare sighting in areas not used to snow. Jacksonville Today thanks our ...

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