Progress, and more work to be done
Area leaders mark Martin Luther King Jr. Day with reflection, call to action
By DIANE BRONCACCIO
Recorder Staff

GREENFIELD — The desperate plight of Haitians after last week's earthquake was part of this year's more somber Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration at Greenfield Community College.

But between an opening “moment of silence” for the suffering Haitians and an ending sing-along of “We Shall Overcome,” participants spoke of how far we've come in realizing King's “Dream,” and of how far we have yet to go.

Celebration co-founder Dwayne Brewington said there were two significant “White Houses” in his life: The first was GCC as he remembers it from

1986 — when he felt like the only black man on campus.
The second is the White House in Washington, D.C., built with slave labor but now inhabited by the first black American president.

“When I first arrived at GCC, all I saw were white folks,” explained Brewington. “They really didn’t have any idea what I felt like (on campus) as the only African-American male. I termed this institution the White House,” because it was not for people of color.” He said he and his wife discussed leaving the college, but instead, decided to make sure they were part of the college. Instead of dropping out, the Brewingtons became active in student government and started a Multicultural Club, to celebrate different peoples and cultures. At first, he said, it was for food festivals and fun get-togethers, but eventually they wanted to

stance against racism. He said the college hired new professors, including Herbert Hentz, admissions and diversity director, who has been a role model for students.

“I’m very proud to say I graduated from here,” he said.

Watching Obama's inauguration with his son in Washington, D.C., was a source of great joy, said Brewington, who brought photographs and a scrapbook of mementos from that day.

“For me, it was the most powerful moment of my lifetime. I never knew we would see this: A black man as president.”

Brewington said he has never told his children that they could someday be president if they wanted it and worked hard enough. When Brewington and his son watched Obama's inauguration, “We shared that joy,” he said.

College President Robert L. Pura spoke of how helping the Haitians in this time of crisis is related to the legacy of Dr. King.

“I have no doubt that were Dr. King alive today, he would be in Haiti doing all that he

have died for justice and honor, and pray for current leaders in the belief they can reach wise and fair conclusions for all of us,” said Hentz.

Dr. Daniel Zinn, a Greenfield physician, cited a television news e-mail poll in which respondents said they believed 80 percent of King's dream has come true. “I have the Harvard professor last summer who was arrested for breaking into his own home, and a Springfield youth who was beaten by police officers. “We're still a long way from 90 percent,” he said.

Hentz said King strove all his life to fight poverty and racism.

Only about two dozen people were involved in planning the event, but a much larger group came out to participate. Rules of conduct were clarified in the beginning, and everyone was encouraged to volunteer with the Community Meals programs and others were attending other King celebrations in the region.

Also, the awarding of the annual Living the Dream and Bright Light prizes will be announced on Feb. 1, when the college is in session, so that more students can participate.