



Denkin and Williams: Celebrating Anne Frank and Dr. King

By David Denkin and Charles E. Williams, Guest Columnists

Posted Feb 11, 2019 at 6:00 AM

On Feb. 4, 5 and 6, an impressive collaboration of partnerships came together in celebration of the writings, words, and inspiration of two individuals, born in the same year, who never met but who both inspired and continue to inspire men and women throughout the world — Anne Frank and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Their words shaped a world, impacted people, and spoke to the confluence of good and evil, empathy and disdain, acceptance and rejection and despair and hope.

Anne Frank was a German-Jewish teenager who was forced to go into hiding in Nazi-occupied Holland during the Holocaust. Shortly after receiving a diary for her 13th birthday, Anne Frank started recording entries of her experience that still echo in the minds of those of us who read her writings for the first time many years later.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a Ph.D. in philosophy, a civil rights activist, and an ordained minister, shaped the modern civil rights movement in America with words of inspiration and nonviolent protest. His oratory and writings have yet to be equaled in impact by anyone who has come after his murder in 1968.

Embracing Our Differences, the Jewish Federation of Sarasota-Manatee, the Community Foundation of Sarasota County, the Boxser Diversity Initiative, the Sarasota County Bar Association's Diversity and Inclusion Committee, the Anne Frank Center for Mutual Respect, along with co-chairs of this effort, Terri Vitale,

Sydney Sforzo and Chip Gaylor, Esq., brought to Sarasota multiple performances of the stage production of “Letters from Anne and Martin.”

The courage and eloquence of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Anne Frank were interwoven in this unique play combining texts from “Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl” and Dr. King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”

Powerful stage readings of their words were performed for over 4,500 students from Sarasota and Manatee county schools hosted at Riverview High, Venice High, North Port High and Out-of-Door Academy. The play was also shown to an adult audience at an event held at Temple Beth Sholom in Sarasota.

At the Temple Beth Sholom performance, in the audience was Pieter Kohnstam, born in Amsterdam in 1936. It was by chance that the Kohnstams’ apartment in Amsterdam was downstairs from the family of Anne Frank. It was Pieter’s mother Ruth who suggested to Anne’s mother, Edith, that Anne keep a diary.

Pieter’s family, along with Pieter, eventually fled the Netherlands, while the Frank family went into hiding, resulting in two very separate fates. To have Pieter in the audience, whom Anne Frank babysat when Pieter was a child, gave her words an even deeper emotional impact.

The most pleasant surprise from the performance was the dialogue among the performers, facilitators and student audience following the play. The questions by the students, their curiosity about the historical events of the play and their affirmation of the continued relevance of the words of Dr. King and Anne Frank, were reassuring.

As judges, we are inspired by the words of both of these individuals, and to quote any words from either only increases our desire to find more quotes from their writings.

As judges, we understand that there is no greater impact to us personally than when we hear them both speak of what can only be described as pleas and reflections on justice and reconciliation.

Dr. King tells us, “The time is always right to do right.”

Anne Frank inspires us and gives us hope for mankind when she says, “How wonderful is it that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.”

As we reflect on where we are as a society today, these words still ring true. In an increasingly uncordial democracy, the challenges we face to preserve our system of laws and government are at a level unseen since the world crisis we confronted prior to World War II (the time of Anne Frank).

The political division of our country, and the inability of American citizens to even agree on issues as basic as who is a citizen in this country deserving of the full protection of our Constitution, is now at a level that existed at the beginning of the modern civil rights movement in the 1950s and '60' (the time of Dr. King).

Our country and especially our young people need to be reminded of what can occur when words have the power of neutralizing hateful rhetoric and actions and yet inspire us to overcome adversity and challenge us to do something.

A new generation of students and adults, now more than ever, needs to listen carefully to the words of these two historical icons to be reminded of where we have been, what we have been through and, more important, where we must go now to make sure there never is a repeat of the circumstances that brought these two martyrs to the world stage.

As members of the judiciary, we recognize that words often can be the precursors of acts of violence. We also recognize that words form the basic foundation of our country's freedoms in our laws and Constitution. It is our hope as judges, and as citizens, that the words of Anne Frank and Dr. King remind us of the latter and put out the fiery and divisive rhetoric that often forms the former.

The words of Anne Frank and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. remind us that we have the opportunity and the moral responsibility to help and foster the betterment of the world that we all share.

David Denkin is a county judge and Charles E. Williams the chief judge in Florida's 12th Judicial Circuit.