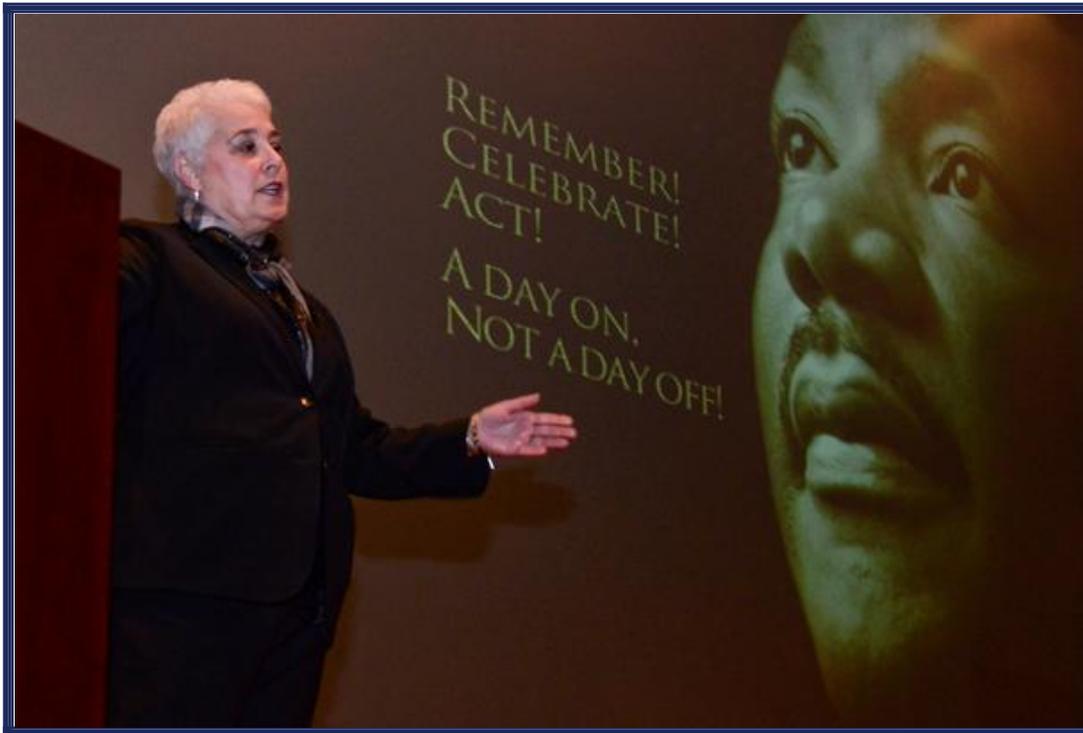




Martin Luther King Jr. event emphasizes community involvement



"I've never seen America so deeply divided, so unable to come together for a common cause," said Jan Nave Barnes, a St. Mary's County realtor who spoke as part of the Naval Air Warfare Center Aircraft Division's Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. celebration Jan. 14. Barnes reflected on her family's experiences of terrorism at the hands of racist whites in Mississippi in the summer of 1964. "I hope 50 years on, this is a country still capable of coming together for the greater national purpose." (U.S. Navy photo)

NAVAL AIR SYSTEMS COMMAND, PATUXENT RIVER, Md. — The long, hot "Freedom Summer" of 1964 in McComb, Mississippi, was anything but slow. It was a summer simmering with racial tensions, exploding into heated hate.

For Jan Nave Barnes and her family, the "Freedom Summer" meant being forced to move from McComb to Jackson, Mississippi, and later, to Washington, D.C. Barnes shared her family's history with the civil rights movement at an event commemorating Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at the Center Stage Theater Jan. 14.

"In a climate of fear and fury, nothing was seen as innocent," Barnes recalled.

Her parents, William "Red" and Mary Alva "Malva" Heffner, were terrorized in the summer of 1964 by racist whites who called in death threats, poisoned their dog and slashed their car tires, all because they had welcomed into their home civil rights workers the Rev. Donald McCord of the Council of Federated Organizations and Dennis Sweeny of the



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Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. They were also friends of King and his wife.

Barnes had recently been crowned Miss Mississippi, so pageant officials ushered her away to live with her grandmother and avoid McComb, dubbed by Time magazine as the "toughest anti-civil rights area in the union." She never returned to her house again but instead had to visit her family at a local hotel when she came into town.

Her parents, tired of the abuse, quit McComb and moved to Jackson but were harassed there, too. The apartment owner asked them to leave because he feared bomb threats. Malva even lost her government job because of pressure from the former Mississippi governor.

Eventually, the Heffners settled outside Washington and remained there until their deaths in the 1990s. Barnes herself never moved back to Mississippi, and neither did her sister. Some of her high school classmates will not speak to her to this day, although some have since apologized, she said.

"It hurts," she said, "but life goes on, and you go along with it. [Living through that] gave me more empathy and compassion for people and a stronger feeling of community and community involvement. Regardless of the outcome, you can be a big part of your community."

Making a difference in the community was what NAVAIR Commander Vice Adm. Paul Grosklags imparted to the 186 attendees.

"In honor of his [King's] legacy, I'd like to challenge each of us to go out and make a difference," he said. "It doesn't matter how big or small. It's the little things that we can do as individuals that will have a big impact on our communities, our Navy and our nation."