

Academe of the Oaks Students Celebrate MLK Day with Honors and Activism



Students and guests sign letters in support of prisoners of conscience during MLK Day celebration at Academe of the Oaks.

Students at Academe of the Oaks, an independent high school grounded in Rudolf Steiner’s Waldorf curriculum and philosophy, honored the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on Tuesday, January 17, with a daylong celebration of the civil rights leader and the spirit of activism and respect for human rights he embodied.

Academe students kicked-off the day by joining Waldorf School of Atlanta (WSA) students for a comprehensive program of music and readings held in the sanctuary of the Columbia Presbyterian Church. Beginning with a processional by kindergarten and lower school students to the traditional spiritual “Freedom is Coming,” the program mixed gospel greats such as “Gonna Lay Down My Burden” and “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” with the classic anti-war anthem “If I Had a Hammer” and ensemble readings from King’s “Mountaintop” and “I Have a Dream” speeches.

Maya, a junior, told the story of Stephen Biko, the anti-apartheid, South African activist, and students performed an inspirational version of Peter Gabriel’s “Biko,” an African-inflected homage celebrating his life (and featured in the 1987 Oscar-nominated film *Cry Freedom*), followed by a dramatic drumming recessional.

Waldorf School seventh- and eighth-graders joined the Academe student body for a lunch of international dishes and for a presentation by Savannah Fox, field organizer at Amnesty International, who discussed the organization’s history, achievements and current struggles. Amnesty representative Dr. Tara Wyman (faculty sponsor of Academe’s student chapter of Amnesty International) then introduced Academe students Aidan, a sophomore, Emily and Aiden, seniors, and Colin and Ben, juniors, who shared stories about imprisoned individuals around the world and in the U.S.-each noting how Amnesty’s massive letter-writing campaigns can influence and often help resolve these and other modern-day civil and human rights struggles.

The narratives struck a chord with students. For example, Aiden described the arrest and imprisonment of 31-year-old Cameroonian Jean-Claude, who is serving three years in prison for the “crime” of homosexuality. “He’s just one of many gay, lesbian, trans-gender and bisexual prisoners” serving time in African prisons for simply being themselves, Aiden explained. Ben described the imprisonment of two Iranian students charged with protesting the government during an illegal gathering. In each of these cases, students noted, direct letter-writing campaigns to elected leaders or members of the judiciary can make the difference between life and death.

To that end, Academe students overwhelmingly accepted Fox's call to action and gathered around a sign-up table with candles spotlighting each individual mentioned. As Fox explained, the simple act of letter writing continues to be a powerful force for change. "When governments know the world is watching, they will think twice about violating someone's human rights."

In closing, Leana, a senior, announced the upcoming April 21 fundraising event at Academe benefitting the Sophie Lancaster Foundation, an English foundation dedicated to "Stamping Out Prejudice, Hatred and Intolerance Everywhere" (SOPHIE).