

Local leaders assess state of Black Rochester

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Echoes from the past evoked emotions reflecting the current state of Black Rochester during this year's MLK Day Community Celebration held at Kodak Hall inside Eastman Theatre.

"Why are we here this morning," emcee Simeon Banister asked the crowd as he announced the theme for the event, "who we ought to be."

The quote comes from the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., who said:

In a real sense, all life is interrelated. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. ... This is the interrelated structure of reality.

Banister is president and CEO of Rochester Area Community Foundation, which hosted the 39th annual celebration.

He recalled witnessing a recent collaboration between Garth Fagan Dance and the Rochester Philharmonic. He highlighted how the fusion of these two distinct styles and backgrounds served as an outstanding example of what Rochester has the potential to become.

Banister contrasted that moment with the recent death of a Rochester man who was caught on video getting kicked out of an ambulance while experiencing difficulty breathing.

The man collapsed on the sidewalk while waiting for another ambulance, and police and medical personnel ignored his plight for over two minutes before rendering assistance. He died two weeks later.

"What I saw that night pulled on my insides," Banister said. "I don't know where we're headed, but what I do know is that ain't' where we ought to be."

Mayor Malik Evans also spoke about the incident, saying, "When we see an individual that is mistreated by medical personnel, when we see the disappointment that we may have in our community, events like this represent infinite hope."



Simeon Banister moderates a panel discussion about the state of Black Rochester. He asks Shaun Nelms, Stanley Martin Irshad Altheimer and Rodney Young to discuss a couple of themes. TINA MACINTYRE-YEE /ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

A focal point of the occasion was a panel discussion that initiated the release of an updated version of the 2013 State of Black Rochester, a 140-page paperback providing insights into racial and ethnic disparities within the Black community.

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- Rodney Young, senior community relationship manager/AALDP coordinator for the United Way of Greater Rochester and Finger Lakes (retired 2024).

- Stanley Martin, Free the People

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Stanley Martin City Council member

The publication included a series of essays from prominent community leaders and experts, complemented by current data compiled by ACT Rochester.

Moderated by Banister, the discussion had four panelists, including:

- Shaun Nelms, vice president for Community Partnerships at University of Rochester and director of the William and Sheila Konar Center for Urban Suc-

ROC and Rochester City Council member.

- Irshad Altheimer, director of Center for Public Safety Initiatives and a professor in the Department of Criminal Justice, Rochester Institute of Technology.

The speakers conveyed diverse opinions regarding the state of Black Rochester, emphasizing that the Black community is not a monolith.

"Although we may be tied by a single garment, we are not singularly defined," Nelms said.

The discussion persisted as the panelists addressed whether the concept of a village within Black Rochester remained intact.

"When I see a Black man who was somehow unsafe in an ambulance, I cannot say that the village is OK," City Council member Stanley Martin said. "We have a long way to go. How we measure how well we're doing is grounded in how the most vulnerable are doing."

A revised edition of The State of Black Rochester is slated for completion early this year.

"Now is the time for us to be active so we can move forward and make progress as a community," Banister said. "The good news is that Dr. King left us a blueprint."

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