

60th Anniversary of March on Washington Event by Friends of Howe House

Speech given by Ollie Hartsfield

Thank you. I'm honored to be here representing the Montclair Race Amity Initiative. We are a multi-racial, multi-cultural group who have come together for the past two years to explore ways to build friendship and unity across racial and cultural lines in service to the community.

Being here today by the Martin Luther King Jr memorial is a full circle moment for me and for the Race Amity Initiative. The first public Montclair Race Amity Day celebration was held here, in this space, two years ago.

The goal of the annual Montclair Race Amity Day is to celebrate and lift up what brings us together.

During that first celebration, we shared stories that showed how, even in the midst of this country's painful history of oppression and injustice, there is another history of people who came together across race and culture to work for social justice and unity.

One of those stories recounted the friendship and collaboration between Dr. King and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Rabbi Heschel walked side by side with Dr. King during the Selma to Montgomery March for voting rights in 1965.

We also shared the local story of what was called "The Mother's Plan", an idea spearheaded by two mothers - one black, one white - for what would become the Montclair magnet school system to desegregate Montclair in the 1970's.

We also talked about the Montclair History Center working with members of the Black community to finally tell the history of the Montclair YWCA - known as the Black YWCA - as part of the full story of the Israel Crane House.

More recently, at this year's Montclair Race Amity Day celebration in June, we presented an award to Friends of Howe House for their multi-racial collaboration to secure and preserve the historic house of James Howe, a formerly enslaved man who gained freedom in 1817.

Let me share one more story. This one is from a podcast by author Heather McGhee that I recommend to everyone. It's called the Sum of Us. She has a book by the same name. In the podcast, she tells the true story of Manhattan Beach, California, a town that in the 1920s used eminent domain to take away an ocean front resort owned by a Black family because they didn't want Black

people in town. To make a long story short, after the history of this racist act was resurfaced almost 100 years later, a resulting collaboration of a multiracial group of citizens and county government officials led to a decree that the land be returned to the family in 2021.

McGhee recounts a lot of true stories like this. Her premise is that the way forward for solving inequalities and injustices is to come together across racial lines to do what we can't do alone.

All of these stories - Rabbi Heschel and Dr. King, the Mother's Plan, Montclair History Center, the Friends of Howe House, and Manhattan Beach, California - are real life examples of what can happen when people come together in unity.

I think we all know that famous line at end of Dr. King's I Have a Dream speech where he talks about the day "...when all of God's children, Black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: Free at last. Free at last. Thank God almighty, we are free at last."

[I'm not even trying to say those words the way he did.]

As a kid, I always heard that line as meaning Black folks would be free at last. As an adult, when I went back to read and study that speech, it sunk in for me that he was saying his dream was that ALL of God's children would be free at last. Free because they'd understand that restoring justice for one group means justice for all.

When I think on all the stories I've just shared with you today, a question comes to me about how do we know if we're moving forward in the effort to solve the inequities and injustices of our society. One metric is, of course, is what laws exist to protect and uphold equity and justice. But it's not just laws, is it? Because laws change and then they change back again, as we're seeing.

What if there's another measure of progress that we must consider and strive for? What if that measure is: Are there *more of us* sitting down and talking with each other, really listening to each other? Are there more of us building relationships across race, across culture, across ideologies, and doing so in spite of all the things that divide us?

What if figuring out how to do more of **that** is how, together, we achieve a common goal of bringing lasting equity and social justice for all?

What if that's how we become free at last?

Thank you.