

I'll never forget that day in 1983 when I sat in Mrs. Boykins' fifth grade class at Phillis Wheatley Elementary School in New Orleans. Despite it being cold, it was a sunny day, a perfect setting for what we were about to hear. We had just received the announcement that Congress had passed legislation to create Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

While we kind of knew what Congress was, all our 10-year-old minds could conceive was that Martin Luther King would have his own holiday! And the fact that he would be the first Black man to have a holiday was even more exciting! Yes, it was saddening over the years to see that some states had rejected the holiday, and it was kind of funny when we heard of people struggling with whether they should stay home or go to work on MLK Day because their state had not yet recognized the holiday.

But over the years, I was happy to watch Dr. King's birthday slowly become recognized across the country. By the year 2000, seventeen years after passing the original legislation, South Carolina became the last state to make MLK Day a paid holiday. However, for me, what made this holiday most special was the year 1994, when MLK Day was designated a National Day of Service. What an awesome way to commemorate a man who gave his life in service for others!

A man who dedicated the last 14 years of his life to unwaveringly standing up for what is right. A man who redefined what nonviolent protest is. One of Dr. King's most famous quotes is "Life's most persistent and urgent question is: 'What are you doing for others?'" This man demonstrated in more ways than one how poignant this question really is.

It might seem to be an easy question to answer. Community service is a large part of our military communities. We even give awards for community service hours. Yet the term "unbothered" has become more and more popular in the last year or so. If it doesn't concern me, I'm unbothered. If it doesn't interfere with my money, I'm unbothered. Others have said that they don't have time for community service, or that community service just doesn't fit their lifestyle. Some might say they're too young or too old, while others might say they just don't see the point. What if Dr. King had taken these same positions? Consider this: Dr. King was only 25 years old, just barely completing his doctoral studies when he took over the pastoral duties of his father's church, Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. Despite the segregated times in which he lived, life was good.

Yet not even a year later, he found himself leading the Montgomery Bus Boycotts after Rosa Parks famously refused to give up her seat on the city's Cleveland Avenue Bus. His life would never be the same after that. What began as a simple protest turned into a movement for civil rights not just for African Americans, but for all people. Over the next 14 years, Dr. King found himself at the helm of boycotts and marches to end racial segregation, unfair hiring practices, voting rights, and other injustices. In fact, the famous March on Washington of 1963 was just as much a protest for economic justice as it was for racial desegregation.

Interestingly, it's quite likely that Dr. King would not have become a pastor and ultimately a Civil Rights champion had it not been for the mentorship of people like his father Rev. Martin Luther King Sr., and Morehouse College President Benjamin E. Mays. In fact, his biography states that prior to meeting Mays, Dr. King, who was accepted to Morehouse at the age of 15, had rebelled against his Christian beliefs and cared very little about school during his first couple years of college. I wonder where this world would be had people given up on him during those formative years? How long would the world have had to wait for Civil Rights legislation if someone had not encouraged him to channel the greatness he had inside?

Like many leaders of today, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., could possibly have become the leader he was because someone mentored him.

Someone listened to him.

Someone believed in him.

That young man went on to challenge segregation laws in a bold and new way. His speeches challenged everyone within earshot. His life of service and peaceful protest, inspired by Muhatma Ghandi and civil rights leader Bayard Rustin, led him to start the Southern Christian Leadership Conference with more than 60 other ministers and civil rights leaders. He organized sit-ins that led to the segregation of lunch counters in 27 cities. He helped organize the famous 1963 March on Washington, and later received the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize.

Did everyone agree with him? No, they didn't.

Was he a perfect man? No, he wasn't.

But did his efforts inspire a generation? Absolutely!

And his life of service continues to inspire. It may not be on as grand a scale as Dr. King, but people all over the world continue to serve their communities in their own ways.

Those who work tirelessly on bake sales, parties, bingo games and other activities to fund scholarships to help graduating high school seniors realize their college dreams. Or those who work in soup kitchens, or give out blankets to give just a little relief to a homeless family.

That is service.

Those who stay behind after the party or briefing to stack chairs and move tables not because they were TOLD to do it, but because they WANTED to do it. Those who visit the church in the middle of the week not to ATTEND service, but to be OF service by cleaning the sanctuary or participating in an activity. Those who volunteer to be chaperones or coaches at their children's schools.

That, my friends, is service.

The organizations who work to donate water to Flint, Michigan so just a few less children would not have to drink poisoned water. The families who opened their homes to flood victims. The sailors who ran a shuttle service during Oktoberfest to keep their fellow service members from driving under the influence.

THAT - is - service!

When we follow Dr. King's example of service, we place ourselves into a situation where we learn about a world that might be quite different from our own. We get to know people we may otherwise never have met. We understand circumstances that we would have never predicted for ourselves. We saw this example during the March on Washington. The 250,000 people who converged on the Lincoln Memorial weren't just African American. Those who dared to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma weren't just African American. Those who were beaten or died in pursuit of civil rights legislation weren't just African American.

Dr. King didn't live to see Barack Obama become the first African American president. He didn't live to see a young John Lewis who was attacked on the Edmund Pettus Bridge go on to become Congressman John Lewis, the gentleman from Georgia. He didn't live to see his fellow activist Andrew Young become Representative Andrew Young and later mayor of Atlanta. Dr. King's life ended April 4, 1968 by a sniper's bullet, less than a year after Thurgood Marshall was appointed to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court.

Yet in his less than 40 years on this earth, despite the jailings, the attempts on his life, the beatings, the arguments with his own camp, and the disrespect he endured from political leaders and even some community members, his efforts played a pivotal role in ending segregation in the United States and helped create the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Did he get tired sometimes? Did he occasionally consider quitting? Was he ever discouraged? I'm sure he was, but he knew what he fought for was much bigger than himself. And today, as our country goes through changes that some feel threaten those very civil rights, let us remember Dr. King's message of love. Let us continue to serve together, conquering hate with love, because as Dr. King once said, "Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend."

So let us be inspired by Dr. King's example of service. Even if you never effect policy changes, lead marches, or deliver speeches, you too are making a difference in your own communities. You are continuing his dream of equality, service, and love for mankind. So although Dr. King's birthday, also known as a National Day of Service has passed, I encourage you to continue serving your communities. Mentor that discouraged teenager. Be that listening ear for a young Soldier. Have the courage to stand up for what's right even when it seems unpopular.

But most of all, make an effort to talk with someone who may not look like you or share the same views as you. That conversation may not breed agreement, but it can foster understanding. You may realize that you're not so different, and that, I believe, is what will help continue keeping "The Dream" alive.

Thank you, Dr. King, for your dream, and thank all you for helping to make his dream a reality.