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Building a Place for All

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Building a Place for All

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Thursday January 23, 2020

By Eric F. Spina

Hundreds of diverse voices beautifully blended together, slowly filling the Kennedy Union ballroom with the familiar refrain of "Lift Every Voice and Sing."

*Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us.*

As I sang along with faculty, staff, and students at the annual Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Prayer Breakfast, I thought about the path we're on to create a more inclusive, diverse, and welcoming campus. It's not a journey without challenges. And it's certainly not a trip we can make overnight. It requires a steadfast commitment that goes well beyond the annual MLK day commemorations that always inspire us to step it up.

Larry Burnley, vice president for diversity and inclusion, moderated a panel at the filled-to-capacity breakfast and offered this challenge: "Building a place for all takes all of us to stand in solidarity to build that community."

But what does standing in solidarity mean in an era where too many people fear “the other,” and far too many still face economic and social inequality? I thought. The panelists, who included UD students Joshua Chambers and Delali Nenonene, reflected on how to make greater progress, particularly right here on campus.

It takes “putting in the work,” even when it’s uncomfortable and unpopular, said assistant professor of history Ashleigh Lawrence-Saunders. It requires “courageous conversations,” added Mary Tyler, outgoing executive director of the National Conference for Community & Justice of Greater Dayton. “We have to quit settling,” said Darius Beckham ’19, a legislative aide to Dayton Mayor Nan Whaley. “It means being bold and strong and courageous, even if it means not being re-elected,” noted the Rev. Norman Searce, pastor of Dayton’s Gateway Cathedral, who serves on the Trotwood-Madison Board of Education.

One by one, the panelists talked about building a community — on campus and in our city — where everyone belongs.

For us, the work starts in the classroom, in the corridors of our residence halls, and in spaces and places all across our campus. As someone who has devoted his life to higher education, I know we must do more to create inclusive space at UD so that we prepare all students for successful careers and compassionate lives in a multicultural world.

I’m particularly proud of the efforts of Dr. Daria Graham, associate dean of students and executive director of the Multi-Ethnic Education and Engagement Center and her team. As more students of more diverse identities began to enroll at UD, she worked with a cross section of the campus community — including panelists Joshua, Delali and Darius — to create U Diversity, a mandatory online tool for incoming students that helps them understand and address stereotypes, unconscious bias, and microaggressions. I am so happy that, beyond our more than 2,000 first-year students, another 2,000 upperclass students also engaged with this important educational module.

Still, this is just the beginning of creating a more seamless multicultural curriculum and university as well as ways that we can work across differences. I appreciated the candid, yet hopeful, assessment of Dr. Lawrence-Saunders, a new faculty member who teaches African American history. “The barrier is a knowledge barrier,” but “college is where you learn to be human, to be a humanitarian in this world.”

As we journey together and equip our graduates with the knowledge and community-building skills to make a difference in a diverse world, the morning’s opening song echoes in my mind: *“That’s the hope that the present has brought us.”*