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## Belonging

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# Belonging : University of Dayton, Ohio

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Monday January 22, 2024

## Belonging

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By Eric F. Spina

Last week's annual campus breakfast honoring the legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. played like a symphony that builds to a powerful crescendo.

Student Government Association President Ben Thomas kicked off the sold-out gathering by urging faculty, staff, and students "to build a campus where every student in every corner feels like they belong."

I echoed the Marianists who invite all to gather around the table as equals. Glancing at the tables that filled the Kennedy Union ballroom, I noted that each voice at our tables deserved respect and that all of us, despite our differences, belonged at the table. "Let's create a new language," I said, "for talking about our shared humanity."

But that morning belonged to Shannon Isom, president and CEO of Columbus Community Shelter and a longtime leader in Dayton, who's been called "a champion for a home for everyone and social justice for all."

An eloquent orator, she held the room spellbound by sharing an agonizing personal story about how, as an eighth grader, she — the first chair in clarinet in her school's band — chose to skip a compulsory concert (and earn her first and only F) to attend MLK Day community celebrations and all that meant to her family, her church, her sense of self.

"The band teacher would not budge," she said. "But without any other African American band students, with less than five African Americans in the entire school, with zero African American teachers, there was no need to have to give grace, to have to adjust, to have to consider, to have to see me. I was the other."

Shannon's words lingered in the air as she talked about the ongoing fight for justice and the Rev. King's call to the country to "exemplify less of the 'I have a dream' soundbite and more of what substantiated it — the laying of one's whole existence for the greater good, for the betterment of those you have yet to meet and those you will never know" whose human flourishing is hampered by poverty, the lack of quality integrated education, and other forms of gross inequity.

"Is it possible to have a room that looks racially diverse and has racial inequity? Is it possible to have a space that has gender diversity and have gender inequities?" she asked. "But until and unless we are dealing with the root causes and systemic issues that have laid the need for diversity, equity, and inclusion, the room can look inclusive and diverse and not be equitable, fair, transparent, open, just, supportive, protective, or honest."

Those are powerful words — spoken with moral clarity and conviction. Shannon challenged us, as "a school of faith, a body of believers committed to the Marianist beliefs," to create spaces where all people feel they belong.

"We believers are called to be of one faith, one body, one church showing that we are one family," she said. "Not showing it through tolerance but through love, through unity, and through peace. That is what believers are called to do.

"That is what MLK, Jr., the practitioner and the minister, was calling us all to do."

*(Photo credit: Sylvia Stahl)*