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OUT IN DC

Recalling King's dream

Led by the LGBT Arts Consortium, various D.C. musical groups are raising their voices to honor Martin Luther King, Jr.

Friday, January 09, 2004

In AUGUST 1963, CIVIL RIGHTS pioneer Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial. Partly because of the success of that speech, and King's devotion to a non-violent struggle for racial and social equality, a federal holiday is observed each January in his honor.

Although King, who was born on Jan. 15, 1929, is remembered primarily for his work to help gain equality for African Americans, individuals active in Washington, D.C.'s gay arts arena also hold a free concert each year in remembrance of the slain civil rights leader.

"We don't celebrate ourselves enough as people, and we celebrate only people who are lesbian and gay. But what about people who had similar ideals?," says Alvin Mayes, a member of the Lesbian & Gay Chorus of Washington and a founding member of Nuance, a male a cappella trio affiliated with LGCW. "That's when I started thinking about Martin Luther King and how that movement has really spearheaded the lesbian and gay movement."

In addition to working with the Lesbian & Gay Chorus of Washington, Mayes, 56, is known for his work as a dance and choreography professor at the University of Maryland.

Nuance and the Lesbian & Gay Chorus of Washington will be performing on Jan. 20 as part of a Martin Luther King Remembrance concert at the Capitol Hill Presbyterian Church in Southeast Washington, D.C.

The LGBT Arts Consortium, an umbrella group for many gay and lesbian art, music, dance, and performing groups in the Washington area, is sponsoring the concert.

"I think for all of us who are still fighting for social justice, there is so much resonance in the thought that until everyone is free, no one is free," says Jill Strachan, general manager for the Lesbian & Gay Chorus of Washington and a member of the LGBT Arts Consortium. "[Dr. King] was such a symbol for that and he saw social justice as the key to so many things."

This year, Nuance will be singing two songs: the spiritual "Steal Away" and "I Will Be Ready," both of which Mayes says speak about the passion of conviction. He came up with the idea for the concert several years ago, and brought it to the Lesbian & Gay Chorus of Washington, which originally sponsored the event. After asking several other artistic groups and individuals in the gay arts arena to join the effort, the chorus passed responsibility for the concert on to the LGBT Arts Consortium last year.

At this year's concert, the Lesbian & Gay Chorus of Washington will be singing selections from "Truth Pressed to the Earth Shall Rise," a piece arranged by Ysaye Maria Barnwell, a member of Sweet Honey in the Rock. The lyrics for the songs are based on and use selections from King's writings.



It was Lesbian & Gay Chorus of Washington member **Alvin Mayes'** idea for gays and lesbians in the arts community to host an annual Martin Luther King, Jr. remembrance concert each January, the month in which the slain civil rights leader was born. King would have been 75 on Jan. 15. (Photo by Luis Gomez)

MORE INFO

Remembrance of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Tues., Jan. 20, from 7 to 8 p.m.
 Capitol Hill Presbyterian Church
 201 4th St., SE
 202-546-1549

www.glbarts.org



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VARIOUS OTHER INDIVIDUALS AND groups supportive of the gay community are involved with this effort. The Capitol Hill Presbyterian Choir, the ensemble that sings during religious services, is the host venue and also will be performing.

The Bread & Roses Feminist singers, which has members that identify as straight, lesbian, and everything in between, also will be performing.

"If you leave equality up to people who already have it, it's less likely to happen," says Carol Wheeler, a song leader for Bread & Roses, who noted that the group's performances are usually political. "Even those of us who have less power, in order to believe, we have to be involved. If only people of color care about people of color having rights, it's less likely to happen."

Bread & Roses will also be singing two spirituals, one written by Charles Albert Tindley, a son of slaves who was born in Berlin, Md. Tindley was self-educated and became a songwriter and an Episcopal minister in Philadelphia.

A number of singers from the Gay Men's Chorus of Washington also are scheduled to perform the Simon and Garfunkel hit "Bridge Over Troubled Water" as well as "Never Ever" a part of a larger work titled "Naked Men."

"'Never Ever' is meant for us to understand that our life takes us many different places and we should take each moment as a gift, and there is always something that we need to give back to the world," says Jeff Buhrman, artistic director for the Gay Men's Chorus of Washington.

GMCW's a cappella group, Potomac Fever, will also be performing two songs, including "Corner of the Sky," a piece from the Broadway musical "Pippin" about finding one's place in the world.

While the two gay male groups' selections may be derived more from popular music than some by other performers, GMCW leaders said they take their role in the celebration just as seriously.

"We think it's an important recognition of the life of [King] and the significance he has not only for racial equality but for all people," says David Bielenberg, GMCW's executive director. "As gay people, we want to recognize that and, by using the arts, it's the appropriate way for us to observe the holiday."

Mayes says he appreciates that his original idea has remained alive and that the event includes a diverse number of participants.

"This performance is really in deference to [King] and celebrates a lot of the principles he had about people being together and not being segregated," he says. "It's a huge collection of people of different races, ages and cultures."

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