

King holiday takes on added significance in age of Trump

By CARA LOMBARDO - Associated Press - Monday, January 16, 2017

MADISON, Wis. (AP) - Landing between President Barack Obama's last major public appearance and President-elect Donald Trump's inauguration, this Martin Luther King Day takes on added significance for many blacks in Wisconsin.

Milwaukee Area Labor Council head Sheila Cochran will spend the day at home with a few close friends, as she always has. But this year, they'll be reflecting on the first black president's legacy while bracing for President Trump.

At his farewell address in Chicago, President Barack Obama sought to leave a lasting message of unity, citing young people's embrace of diversity as evidence racial tensions are improving.

"I agree with the president that things are not what they used to be," Cochran, who is black, said. "But in this country, color still matters."

She pointed to Trump's own campaign rhetoric to illustrate the point: He delayed in disavowing a former Ku Klux Klan grand wizard's support, he spread falsehoods about Obama's birthplace and his signature appeal to African-Americans was simply "What do you have to lose?"

Cochran said Trump's words and actions indicated he had no awareness of - or interest in learning about - other people's experiences.

Cochran said while she's accustomed to setbacks as an organizer, she has never felt as much trepidation as she does with Trump assuming office at a vital time. A Center on Wisconsin Strategy report released Thursday found Wisconsin is one of the bottom three states when it comes to racial disparities in unemployment and incarceration rates. It also noted economic racial disparities in Wisconsin have worsened, rather than improved, over the past 30 years.

Michael Johnson, president of the Boys and Girls Club of Dane County, said if King was alive today, he would recognize progress but always keep up the fight. Johnson urges the kids he works with and his own kids at home to "seek to understand before being understood."

"We're too quick to judge others," Johnson said.

Several events across the state will honor King on Monday. In Milwaukee, Gov. Scott Walker will attend a breakfast at the Italian Community Center and the Marcus Center of Performing Arts will hold the 33rd Annual Martin Luther King Jr. Birthday event. In Madison, Wisconsin Public Radio will host a noon event in the state Capitol rotunda themed "The Journey Ahead."

Mahlon Mitchell, the president of the Professional Fire Fighters of Wisconsin and former candidate for lieutenant governor, worries Trump's presidency will be a dark contrast to Obama's.

"With Trump, it's more about him than about a movement or other people," Mitchell said, adding that politics has to be about how everyone can rise up and succeed together, which is what King preached.

"King's legacy wasn't just about black people," Mitchell said. "It's about equal protection for all."

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