

Though she credits Martin Luther King Jr. as inspiration, words written by eighth grader Hevyn Hensly say it best:

"I realized I had to put my fears behind me and keep moving forward. I knew I still needed to get better, but I had to let go of my fears and doubts and even make some sacrifices if I wanted to better myself."

The Alger Middle School student read her essay submission at a recent luncheon celebrating eighth graders for their participation in the school's first ever Martin Luther King Jr. essay contest. We sponsored the contest with the goal of encouraging students to learn about the Reverend Dr. King's legacy outside of school hours and demonstrate the value of speaking out about the things that matter to them.

"I've always been inspired by the same words cited in Hevyn's essay; '*Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter*,'" said Meijer Business Analyst Torien Harris, one of our team members who helped organize the event. "I may be established in a career and know middle school is far behind me, but I still remember that feeling when I first discovered those words. It's amazing how timeless inspiration can be when someone uses their voice."

The idea for the contest came from Torien and fellow team member Travis Reams as part of the Mosaic Meijer Team Member Resource Group's ongoing efforts to support diverse communities. Once the school's principal approved the idea, Torien worked with Alger Middle School teachers on development.

Rather than requiring students to research and submit an essay about how Dr. King's accomplishments continue to impact lives today, participation was voluntary for the eighth-grade class. A diverse panel of Meijer leaders read a total of 25 submissions and chose three student winners – Hevyn Hensly, Peyton Rowe and David Santillanes-Gomez – to receive \$100 Meijer gift cards. The three finalists also read their essays aloud to sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grade students at a recent luncheon catered by Store Director Shaka Jones from the nearby Meijer in Kentwood, Michigan.

"I'm really proud of how this idea started small and became bigger and bigger," said Colin Christopher, Community School Coordinator at Kent School Services Network, who said the essay contest was a blessing because it makes the class's upcoming trip to Washington D.C. even more meaningful.

"Deciding to make it voluntary gave our students the chance to make the decision themselves, which meant the essays were not just something they threw together the night before," Colin said. "I am so proud of how each of them did their very best and cared about the words they chose to express themselves."

For her essay, Hevyn paired Dr. King's words with her own life experience of trying out for the school's volleyball team. Once nervous about joining the team, the then-seventh grader spent the next year learning from the older players she knew were better at the game, working hard and making necessary sacrifices to improve her performance. As a result, her essay reflected the impact Dr. King's words had in her own life and how they drove her to achieve more.

"Our Mosaic group always says, 'no idea is too big,' so being able to provide a way for students to practice their writing skills and better understand Dr. King's legacy is something I'll never forget," Travis said. "We were thrilled to see the genuine excitement on the faces of every student that took part in the contest."

We're proud of team members like Torien and Travis for sharing their passion for empowerment and learning to inspire future leaders in our community.

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