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The state honors Ohioans at MLK celebration

Columbus — Five Ohio individuals and organizations were recognized today at the 27th annual Ohio Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Commemorative Celebration for their efforts to advance social change.

The event, which was sponsored by the Ohio Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday Commission, was held at the Capitol Theatre in the Vern Riffe Center for Government and the Arts, Columbus.

The speakers included G. Michael Payton, executive director of the Ohio Civil Rights Commission.

"Much like the great leaders of our country including George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and Harriet Beecher Stowe, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a great patriot and prophet whose core principles and ideals are deeply rooted in our most cherished values as a nation," Payton said. "He taught us that we are all cut from the same fabric and what affects any one of us, ultimately will affect us all. Above all, he left us with the message that we all have a responsibility to ourselves and our community to remember Dr. King's legacy, celebrate what he stood for, and act in a way that upholds the values of equality and justice for everyone in our great nation."

Also at the event, the Ohio Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday Commission presented awards to the following Ohioans:

Governor's Humanitarian Award criteria: The recipient of this award has acted independently of associations and organizations. The recipient has given his or her time and service freely to those in need without question and often without recognition. This award honors quiet soldiers who promote the welfare of humanity and elimination of pain and suffering through their own selfless service.

Winner: Dr. Yung-Chen Lu, Columbus — Lu is well known throughout Ohio for his dedication and commitment to serving Ohio's Asian American community. His efforts have helped increase the awareness throughout Ohio of issues and concerns of the Asian American population. Through his collaborating and networking he reaches tens of thousands of Asian Americans each year.

Noticing a need to help central Ohio's Asian American community, he and a few friends began serving hot meals to senior citizens in their community in 1994. Their efforts evolved into the Asian Seniors Meal Program. He and a few friends also started a free health clinic specifically for the Asian American population.

News Release



His contributions also include founding the Columbus Asian Festival, which was first held in 1995. The Memorial Day weekend festival has since grown to attract more than 150,000 attendees. In addition to serving on the festival's organizing committee each year, Lu is the fundraiser for the free festival.

Dr. Lu also is a member of the Greater Columbus Arts Council and was appointed by Governor John R. Kasich to chair the Ohio Asian American Pacific Islander Advisory Council.

Educational Excellence Award criteria: The recipient selected in this category recognizes the personal commitment and example that King provided for academic achievement. Therefore, the recipient has demonstrated a personal commitment to scholarship and/or attainment of educational goals despite significant barriers or obstacles. The recipient also has demonstrated outstanding accomplishments in eradicating systemic barriers that impede the attainment of academic excellence.

Winner: National Black MBA Association, Columbus Chapter — The Columbus chapter of the National Black MBA Association is a non-profit organization with more than 500 members who hold graduate degrees in a variety of disciplines. The association aims to help young people overcome obstacles to education through its Leaders of Tomorrow program, which focuses on improving the academic and leadership skills of minority high school students. To help increase the number of students entering college, especially in business-related disciplines, the members serve as mentors for marginally academic performing students who have leadership potential but need exposure and motivation to make good choices about college, their career and their future.

Social Justice Award criteria: The recipient selected in this category has made significant contributions toward achieving justice for individuals or communities. The recipient may have contributed through the legal, legislative and governmental systems as they apply to the more vulnerable elements of our society. The recipient has engaged in activities that embrace Dr. King's commitment to non-violence while fostering social justice.

Winner: Kyle Earley, Cleveland — Earley is the executive director of the Cleveland Voter Coalition, a nonpartisan voter coalition whose mission is to increase voter participation in Cleveland through education, engagement and empowerment outreach activities and events. He has been successful in engaging the community and its leaders by hosting a variety of community conversations with state and local political and community leaders on the importance of voting and pressing issues facing the community. The coalition has registered new voters, helped relocated voters update their voter registration information, built a strong volunteer base, created a strong relationship among clergy and institutions of faith and ignited a movement of social change through the power of the vote. Earley also helped organize the Cleveland Stop the Violence campaign.

Youth: Capturing the Vision of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Award criteria: The recipients selected in this category have exemplified leadership, commitment to excellence and inter-racial cooperation. The recipients also have demonstrated an adherence to one or more of Dr. King's principles of non-violent social change that include information gathering,

News Release



education, negotiation, personal commitment, direct action and reconciliation. Youth selected in this category were younger than age 21 during the nomination process.

There were two winners in this category.

Winner: Girl Scout Troop 397, Lake Milton — Two years ago the troop developed what has become a project to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. each January. Having been visitors to the local Rescue Mission of Mahoning Valley on multiple occasions, the girls identified the needs for new pillows and pillow cases for mission residents. The inspiration for the project was Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech. The girls felt that in order to have a dream, one needed a pillow. The girls look forward to delivering the new pillows each year on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. The troop is made up of the following students in grades eight through 12: Autumn Kozma, Kayla Malmfeldt, Danielle Metts, Samantha Metts, Brooke Rodgers, Dominique Trimboli, Elizabeth Stoneburner and Leah Yochman.

Winner: Mahoning Valley Sojourn to the Past, Youngstown — The contributions of the students participating in the Mahoning Valley Sojourn to the Past are many. The journey began five years ago with a small group of educators whose mission was to enable individuals to participate in educational activities that encouraged personal growth. In 2006, Penny Wells, then a history teacher at Volney Rogers Junior High School in Youngstown led this effort after attending a workshop about Sojourn to the Past, a national program where students take a 10-day educational journey along the path of the Civil Rights Movement through five Southern states. Each spring since 2007, Wells, who has since retired from teaching, has taken a group of high school students on the Sojourn to the Past trip. Prior to their travel, they are required to participate in weekly meetings where they study the Civil Rights Movement. After the first Youngstown group came home, they made numerous speeches to school and community groups and implemented a voter registration drive at area high schools and Youngstown State University. A couple of years later, another group of participants successfully petitioned leaders in Youngstown to declare the first week in October of each year Non-Violence Week in Youngstown. This fall the Sojourn to the Past participants, led by 12th-grader Janae Ward of Chaney High School, organized the first non-violence parade and rally, which was held Oct. 2. More than 500 people – including community leaders and representatives from community organizations, churches, and YSU student organizations and athletic teams – participated.

Today's event also featured the following winners from the 2011 Statewide MLK Oratorical Contest, which also is sponsored by the Ohio Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday Commission. The winners of this April contest who spoke today were McKenna Hensley, New Albany; Caitlyn Merkel, Lima; and Joel Yirenkyi, Columbus.

The commission is housed in the Equal Opportunity Division of the Ohio Department of Administrative Services, which provides centralized support for state agencies.