



Father and son share the same passion to help make the world a better place.

Martin Luther King III

Carrying On the Work of Both His Parents

By Tom Schuman

Ever since Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated nearly 40 years ago, his family has carried on the civil rights leader's legacy. That work continues today.

Shortly after her husband was killed on April 4, 1968, Coretta Scott King started the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change. In early 2006, Martin Luther King III built upon an idea he was already working on and formed a new group, Realizing the Dream, to recognize the lifelong example set by his mother.

Realizing the Dream is among the latest outreaches for King, who majored in political science and history at Morehouse College. Among his previous roles have been working as a human rights activist, an elected member of the Fulton County (Georgia) Board of Commissioners, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (which his father co-founded in 1957) and leader of the King Center for Nonviolent Social Change.

King will be bringing his message, "My father's dream, my mission" to the Indiana Chamber's 18th Annual Awards Dinner on November 8. In an interview with *BizVoice*[®], King shares his thoughts on a variety of topics.

BizVoice[®]: You are on a listening and learning tour with Realizing the Dream. What are you hearing from people across America and what are you learning?

Martin Luther King III: "I came to the conclusion after my mom passed in January 2006 that I wanted to do something to memorialize her legacy and the work she did. We're doing that with the intent of three programmatic forces or directions. The first area we are focusing on is nonviolent conflict resolution training, teaching people how to live together without destroying personal property.

"The second area we are focusing on is targeted youth leadership training. I think it is very imperative our young people be given some kind of leadership training in terms of development for the future.

"The third area is community and economic development. That is what we have been doing over the last 16 months – traveling around America and focusing America's attention on poverty. In each community, we convene business leaders, religious leaders, elected officials and community

leaders. In my view, those are the individuals who can have the greatest impact in terms of addressing the issues of poverty.

“In most areas, you’ve got similar issues, including inadequate education. There are high-level jobs in some communities, but because the population is not educated well enough, they’re not capable of vying for those jobs.

“A second issue is lack of affordable housing. A third common issue is inadequate health care and health care facilities. A fourth issue that exists in many of these communities is, because of all these things, there are serious levels of crime or criminal activity. For example, in the Native American communities, alcoholism is at a significant level. That’s in many communities because people unfortunately tend to use alcohol to escape from the problems they’re encountering.

“Thus far, we’ve visited about 30 communities.”

BV: When you walk away from these sessions, are you encouraged by the leaders you’ve brought together, by the potential solutions?

MLK III: “Yes, if you use the analogy of bringing people together and lighting a match, then Martin King and Realizing the Dream can be part of helping a community, but the community has to sustain activities. Most of the time what we do is hopefully bring hope to the communities. Ultimately, I want to go back to these communities and launch an initiative.

“One of the initiatives we are looking at is revitalizing Martin Luther King thoroughfares. All over America, there are about 700 of them, and most of them are located in blighted areas. If we can help to galvanize funding for revitalizing those areas, that’s certainly one of the ways we can begin to address poverty.

“I’m very optimistic about what we’re doing. The first thing

The scene in Washington, D.C. on August 28, 1963, when Martin Luther King Jr. gave his “I Have a Dream” speech.



Martin Luther King III is proud of programs he was able to implement in Fulton County, Georgia.

we needed to do was raise the issue. Now is the time, because a lot of the elected officials and those running for office are raising the issue. America has not really focused on poverty at all. The current administration has been so preoccupied with terrorism that it really hasn’t had the ability to focus on anything else.”

BV: How much closer are we to “realizing the dream?” Has there been significant progress from when your father was working on these issues 40 years ago?

MLK III: “Let me put it this way. He talked about the triple evils of poverty, racism and militarism – and militarism is closely linked to violence. In his lifetime, he addressed many of those issues. Racism is

certainly much better than it ever has been in one sense. That does not mean we have turned the corner and racism is no longer an issue; it really is. Today, Sen. (Barack) Obama can be a serious candidate and one who potentially could be our president. Twenty years ago, or even 10 years ago, that could not have happened.

“But because of racism and fear, he had to at an early stage get Secret Service because of the seriousness of the threats made on his life just because he is African American. But the reality again, on the other side of the coin, is he could not have been a serious contender (previously). In the area of race, although we still have strides to make, we have made significant progress.

“But in relationship to poverty and violence and militarism, they are at epidemic levels. In fact, I would almost say we’re going in the wrong direction. We’ve not addressed the 36 million people we know are living in poverty and the 45 or 46 million who have no health insurance. It’s almost as if – I don’t want to say we’ve given up because I and others are not going to allow that to happen – but we certainly have not focused on this issue.



“That’s part of what this effort is about. However long it takes to continue to raise these issues and develop strategic plans to address those issues, I will – because it’s part of my father’s and mother’s legacy and part of the work that I’m very concerned about in terms of our nation becoming an even stronger nation.

“I believe our nation is only as strong as the philosophy of a chain being only as strong as its weakest link. Wherever there are weak links, we have to find ways to shore those up, which means we have to find a way to provide the best quality of education for all the people in our nation that we can. We have to find a way to create an environment for entrepreneurship so that new and developing businesses can begin and be sustained. We have to find a way to address the health care crisis in our nation. Almost equally as important, in my opinion, is saving of our environment as poor people will be impacted more than anyone else in relation to global warming.”

BV: Talk a little about your parents’ impact on you and what you’ve learned from them.

MLK III: “I’d have to say my mom was the primary person in our family that provided our foundation. I was 10 years old when my dad passed. To me, he was daddy. It was when I became older that I really learned the meaning of what his work was, when I began to read his writings and speeches and sermons. I thought that what he was doing wasn’t unique or unusual. He and his colleagues, the team around him, were all engaged in the same kind of work. As a kid I thought, for example, that when something was wrong in our society, the way you addressed it was you would go to jail to get it fixed. Because that’s what my dad did. It wasn’t until later that I understood the serious sacrifices and the strategies that he and his team were involved in that helped transform and make our nation a better nation.

“I’ve certainly learned a lot from him, but my foundation came from my mom. What my mom taught us was, first and foremost, we had to have a love of ourselves. When we mastered that, which is sometimes a lifetime process, we had to have a love of our family. And then we must have a love for our community. Finally, we must have a love of God. Not necessarily in that order, but close to that order.

“Seeing both my parents involved in the work they were involved in was a tremendous influence to me and all my siblings.”

BV: Has being Martin Luther King III opened doors for you and made your work easier, or put undue pressure and burden on you as you try to reach your objectives?

MLK III: “I always try to perceive everything as not a burden. I would fail miserably if I tried to use a barometer of trying to be like my dad. I’m thankful my mom taught me to just be the best Martin I can be. So I’ve not gone through life trying to be Martin Luther King Jr.



Recent Annual Dinner Speakers/Entertainers

- 2006 — Mary Matalin and James Carville
- 2005 — Bob Costas
- 2004 — Tim Russert
- 2003 — Mark Russell
- 2002 — Capitol Steps
- 2001 — The Motley Fool
- 2000 — Al Franken
- 1999 — Alvin Toffler
- 1998 — Steve Forbes
- 1997 — Abraham Lincoln impersonator
- 1996 — Dee Dee Myers and Marlin Fitzwater

“Secondly, there is so much goodwill that I don’t think we’ve even scratched the surface to tap into. There are far more opportunities than there are challenges. It is a huge and awesome responsibility to carry such an incredible name, but I try not to look at that as a burden – I think burden is more negative. There are far more opportunities that can occur over a period of time.

“I’ve been blessed to be able to travel around the world and meet all types of different people. For that reason, I think it’s important to give something back to the community that nourished my growth and development. In fact, that’s one of the reasons I ran for public office, from 1987-1993 I was a county commissioner, and I was able to do some things I am very proud of, being able to open some doors.”

BV: It’s going to take tremendous leadership to solve some of these issues, to carry things forward. Is there any sense of lack of leadership? Are we doing a good job of grooming leaders to take on these challenges?

MLK III: “As I’ve gone around the country, I’m sensing a new spirit of desire from young people. What I mean by that is historically, maybe even the last 10 to 15 years, there has been a dormant kind of movement – almost apathy. It seemed like apathy existed

on college campuses. Today, there is a new enthusiasm and excitement. Part of it has to do with the political climate. We've gone through five to six years of a very difficult time in trying to address terrorism.

"I think there is an opportunity to teach and train leaders. That's part of what we want to do. I don't think there are a lack of leaders out there, but there hasn't been the connectiveness in the past that has needed to occur. But I see it beginning to happen now. People deciding they want to work closer together, not just on political issues, but leadership in every genre. Everything had to go through a transition. There are a number of things that are happening that I think are going to change the tenor of our nation and our world. If we were not willing to embrace some of these things, we would be in far worse shape. I'm not suggesting we're in good shape, but the ground is fertile for new leadership to emerge."

BV: You're coming to the Indiana Chamber event to speak to a primarily business audience. What are the messages you try to convey to a group like that? What do you hope they walk away with after hearing you speak?

MLK III: "I'm going to talk about the work I'm involved in and ask for help. None of us are islands. We all need the help and assistance of others. Probably one of the most important ingredients for success in any community is the business community. The business community can be behind the scenes or be proactive and take a real leadership role to bring about change. Some of what I will be focusing on is a challenge to the business community – to be a headlight rather than a taillight. It's in all of our best interests."

BV: What are some of the resources you learn from today – books, people, places you turn to for guidance?

MLK III: "I've read a number of books in relation to business and also spiritually. Individually, it's people like Andrew Young (former mayor of Atlanta and U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations in the Carter administration), who was one of my father's lieutenants and is the chairperson of our Realizing the Dream board.

"I just launched a global initiative that is designed around the issue of world peace. I should have mentioned that I will also be talking about that. The group is called Generation II Peacekeepers. It's under the banner of Realizing the Dream,

but it's a separate entity. It is really the daughters and sons and grandchildren of some of our greatest leaders in the world who have been fostering peace throughout their existence.

"Our goal is to go around to places in the world where there are troubles. For example, at some point we will go to the Middle East to look at the Israeli and Palestinian situation and all the surrounding countries. We'll go perhaps to North Korea, to hopefully address the acceleration of the nuclear program, which looks to be simmering down some already. Perhaps we'll go to Darfur to address genocide in that region. We'll go perhaps to Burma, where there are serious human rights violations. We will bring our collective experiences to the table to hopefully try to address some of these critical issues. Ultimately, the goal is for world peace."



Among those participating with King in the Gen II Global Peace initiative:

- King Abdullah II, who became the leader of Jordan upon the death of his father, King Hussein
- Arun Gandhi, grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, Indian spiritual leader
- Kerry Kennedy, daughter of Sen. Robert and Ethel Kennedy
- Nechemia (Chemi) Peres, son of Shimon Peres, former prime minister of Israel
- Dalia Rabin, daughter of Yitzhak Rabin, former prime minister of Israel
- Justin Trudeau, son of former Canadian prime minister Pierre Trudeau
- Naomi Tutu, daughter of Desmond Tutu, former archbishop of South Africa
- Christine Chavez-Delgado, granddaughter of Cesar Chavez, leader of the United Farm Workers
- Nadim Gemayel, son of Bachir Gemayel, a Lebanese military commander and politician

BV: Of the many things you have done and continue to do, can you point to several that you are most proud of?

MLK III: "When I was an elected official (Fulton County, Georgia, which includes Atlanta), we had 30 to 35 department heads. Most of those department heads were primarily male, and primarily white males. I was able to create the Department of Contract Compliance and Equal Employment Opportunity to ensure that we had a diverse workforce in terms of the leadership and also to ensure that as we gave out government contracts more groups were able to participate in that process. When I came to Fulton

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County, we probably had less than 5% of our contracting going to women, small developing businesses and African American businesses. We were able to raise that level so that more people would be able to participate. I'm very proud of the fact we created that. Today, it's still in place to ensure that diversity is at the workforce level and the leadership level in the county.

"We created another program called A Call to Manhood, which is designed to mentor young children who are displaced, primarily at-risk children. That program is still going on today. I'm certainly very proud of those initiatives.

"I guess one day I'll be proud of what we're able to do with this brand new initiative we just launched – this Gen II initiative. Until we have a victory, I can't say that. It took us over a year to assemble everyone, so we accomplished a major objective in a very short period of time. Once we are able to go to some of the areas of the world and create a victory or two, I'm certainly going to be proud that we as a group came together and were able to forge our collective abilities to bring about some degree of peace in the world."

BV: As you continue your work with Realizing the Dream, do you set goals related to time – what you would like to see accomplished in five years, 10 years, 20 years, etc.?

MLK III: "We do have goals. At the end of this year, for example, we will have a summit in Washington in which we will share our findings and we'll bring people from each community to the table to discuss those findings. Then we'll be submitting those reports to Congress and to the president and to governors and other elected officials in communities.

"Then we want to go back and launch an initiative – a five-year plan, then a 10-year plan in terms of what we want to see in terms of execution by communities. It's going to be ambitious to get to 50 communities in 10 years, but over that period we'll probably address some initiatives in at least 15 to 20 communities.

"What we're developing is partnerships with those local organizations already involved in the work. Instead of us starting a new entity in each community, we're bringing the entities that already exist to work together. It makes it more palatable and it makes our chance for success much greater because we don't have to go ahead and create new infrastructure."

INFORMATION LINK

Resource: Order your 18th Annual Awards Dinner tickets at (800) 824-6885 or online at www.indianachamber.com

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