“Diversity of every sort is integral to our academic mission, along with connections to local, national, and global communities.” So reads the last sentence of the University of Hartford’s academic mission statement.

In its formative years in the 1960s and early 1970s, the University experienced some campus unrest, as both white and black students protested for change. For black students, the concerns were about recruitment efforts, financial aid, and curriculum. Eventually negotiations broke down, and there was a four-day takeover of the chancellor’s office in 1971. Some of the resultant gains, won more than 40 years ago, remain evident on campus today.

The University’s commitment to holding a celebratory event to commemorate Martin Luther King Jr’s legacy was enhanced this year with an exhibition of portraits titled Lest We Forget in Mortenson Library. The portraits of leaders of the civil rights movement were painted by Robert Templeton of Woodbury, Conn.

Several faculty members’ research and courses focus on racial diversity and other current and historical issues in African American studies. We invited Warren Goldstein, professor of history in the College of Arts and Sciences, to share some of his research and insight on Martin Luther King Jr. Robert Churchill, associate professor of history in Hillyer College, offers some lesser-known facts about the Underground Railroad.

Civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. sits in a jail cell at the Jefferson County Courthouse in Birmingham, Ala. © Bettmann/CORBIS
In the spring of 1963 the civil rights movement needed a victory badly. Perhaps even more than the movement, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. needed a big win.

Even though today we celebrate his birthday as a federal holiday and the nation recently dedicated a massive monument to him between the Jefferson and Lincoln Memorials in Washington, D.C., it is worth looking at just how tenuous King’s grasp on history was back in 1963.

After being thrust into local and national prominence by the yearlong Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955–56, King and his organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), struggled to find traction over the next half-dozen years. Key movement landmarks more or less passed King by.

The 1960 sit-in movements owed more to the energy of students in Greensboro, N.C., and the Gandhi-inspired teaching of the Rev. James Lawson in Nashville, Tenn., than to King or the ministers of the SCLC. (The sit-ins may be the closest historical parallel to the nearly leaderless Occupy movement of 2011, which seemed to spring up independently all over the country and the world.) The young people’s organization born out of the sit-ins, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), had, at best, an uneasy relationship with the SCLC.

When the May 1961 Freedom Rides excited violent white resistance to integration in Alabama and Mississippi, and focused national attention on the courageous young black and white riders, King resisted pressure to ride the buses, saying, “I should choose the time and place of my Golgotha [biblical name of the site of Jesus’s crucifixion].” SNCC members took to mocking King as “de Lawd.” Then, in 1962, King and the SCLC took part in a disorganized, SNCC-led attempt to desegregate Albany, Ga.—which flopped.

After a brilliant beginning, in other words, Martin Luther King Jr. experienced years of drift and failure. But when the SCLC targeted Birmingham, Ala., one of the most segregated cities in the entire South, King and his staff worked closely with local civil rights leaders to carefully plan their campaign, known as Project C, for confrontation.

Designed to disrupt the Easter shopping season, the demonstrations began in April. For several weeks, police chief Theophilus Eugene “Bull” Connor, who had a well-deserved reputation for segregationist brutality, maintained relative restraint and calmly filled the jails with protesters while ignoring their demands. Just as frustrating, King faced criticism from middle-class African Americans for rocking the local boat, as well as from white moderates who thought they were already making significant racial progress.

By Good Friday, the movement had stalled. It had run out of bail money and was running out of foot soldiers. To neutralize a march planned that day, Bull Connor had obtained a broad injunction against any kind of demonstrations. King’s advisors argued heatedly about whether he should march and surely go to jail—thereby locking up the movement’s chief fundraiser—or knuckle under to Connor and preserve King’s freedom.

The religious timing—the holiest week in the Christian calendar—must have brought almost unbearable emotional intensity to an already grave and confounding moment. King retired to his room to pray, and when he emerged, he was wearing jeans and a chambray work shirt—ready for a march and jail.

“I don’t know what will happen,” he remembered saying. “I don’t know where the money will come from. But I have to...
make a faith act.” As King aide Andrew Young told an interviewer later, this moment was “the beginning of his true leadership.”

Arrested within blocks, King ended up in solitary, tomblike confinement and passed what he described as “the longest, most frustrating and bewildering hours I have lived,” since not even lawyers were allowed to see him until the next day. As Christians the world over celebrated Jesus’s Resurrection on Easter, King remained in jail. Monday brought good news: singer, actor, and civil rights activist Harry Belafonte had raised $50,000 for bail money; and bad: local white clergy had written an open letter in Sunday’s papers criticizing King and his demonstrations as “unwise and untimely.”

Stung, King began to compose his reply in the margins of the newspaper, eventually completing a 7,000-word response during the next five days in jail that became known as the “Letter from Birmingham City Jail.” It contains King’s single most concentrated and eloquent explanation of the theory and practice of nonviolent direct action.

As to the question of timing, he replied, “Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct-action campaign that was ‘well timed’ in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation.” To those who accused him of refusing to negotiate, King argued, “The purpose of our direct-action program is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation.” Eventually, the “Letter” would circulate around the world, becoming the great classic statement of nonviolent direct action. But global fame lay very much in the future when King left that Birmingham jail on April 20.

Instead, as the media began to leave and it looked as though Birmingham’s leaders had stonewalled the movement successfully, King approved a daring move, first suggested by his brilliant aide, James Bevel, to have schoolchildren join the protests en masse. When Bull Connor turned vicious police dogs and high-pressure fire hoses on the children, the shocking images shamed many Birmingham whites, solidified the African-American community behind the protests, and garnered worldwide attention for King and the Birmingham struggle. Eight days later, the city’s business and political leaders had agreed to desegregate public spaces and hire black workers.

The civil rights movement had its most visible victory to date, and Martin Luther King’s reputation as a daring, brave, successful leader was secured. Three months later at the Lincoln Memorial, as the concluding speaker of the March on Washington, he joined the ages with his “I Have a Dream” speech.

Warren Goldstein is a professor and chair of the history department in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University. In November a C-SPAN crew visited campus to film his seminar, Beyond the Dreamer: The Life and Work of Martin Luther King Jr. The segment, which ran on the network’s Lectures in History series in December, features students discussing King’s protest efforts in Birmingham and the overall status of the civil rights movement in 1963. Watch the lecture at www.c-spanvideo.org/program/Jrin.
After welcoming words by President Walter Harrison, fifth-graders from the University of Hartford Magnet School, led by teacher Laura Deutsch, performed “MLK Speakchorus,” a combination of songs and spoken words about King and his legacy.

Three students from the University High School of Science and Engineering drew a standing ovation with their powerful recitations of original poetry.

Hartt School faculty, alumni, and students added moving musical elements to the program. Aja Wilson ’10 sang “Study War No More.” Hartt faculty member Shawn Monteiro sang “Left Alone” by Mal Waldron. She was accompanied by faculty member Nat Reeves on acoustic bass, Mark Templeton on piano, and a quartet of Hartt students on French horn—Adam Grover ’12, Liam Hannah ’14, Cathryn Cummings M’13, and Joshua Thompson M’12. Erica Bryan ’15 closed the program with a stirring rendition of “Lift Every Voice and Sing.”

Winners of the 2012 Martin Luther King Jr. Essay Contest were Melonie Jackson, a fifth-grader at University of Hartford Magnet School; Bo-Edward Lawrence, a senior at University High School of Science and Engineering; and Karina Ma, a University of Hartford senior who graduated in December.

For six weeks in January and February, the walls of the Dorothy Goodwin Café and the lobby of the Mortensen Library displayed a collection of powerful portraits of individuals who personified the struggle for black civil rights in the United States. The portraits in the collection, Lest We Forget: Images of the Black Civil Rights Movement, were painted by Connecticut artist Robert Templeton (1929–91).

Frederick Douglass was there, a former slave who became one of the most eminent human-rights leaders of the 19th century; and Booker T. Washington, who founded what became the Tuskegee Institute at the turn of the last century and hired George Washington Carver as a faculty member; and a diminutive Rosa Parks, whose refusal to move to the back of the bus led to the successful Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955. Martin Luther King Jr.’s direct gaze was there and the intimidating visage of Malcolm X.

Templeton, a prolific portrait painter, happened to be in Detroit, Mich., when the July 1967 race riots broke out. He made sketches of the riots that were featured on that year’s cover of Time magazine’s Aug. 4 issue. The sketches were included in the exhibit.

His experience in Detroit inspired Templeton to take on a remarkable task: to make a visual record of the civil rights movement. He worked with Benjamin Mays—educator, minister, and president of Morehouse College as well as a mentor to Martin Luther King Jr.—to select the people whose portraits would personify the struggle for equal rights. For two decades, the selected leaders sat for Templeton. Martin Luther King was assassinated before his portrait sitting could be scheduled. The painting that appears in the collection was based on a photograph provided by King’s widow, Coretta Scott King.


Young people express their admiration for Martin Luther King Jr.

Lincoln Theater was nearly at capacity for the University’s annual Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration. The audience of faculty, staff, and members of the community was treated to an inspirational program filled with music, poetry, and personal reflections on growing up during the civil rights era by Maestro Willie Anthony Waters (Hon. ’05), former general and artistic director of the now defunct Connecticut Opera.

“Dr. King’s dream is always with me, as I hope it is with all of you,” Waters told the audience. “Not only was his goal racial and social equality . . . , but he also wanted us to believe in ourselves, empower ourselves, believe in what we do, and do it to the best of our ability.”

The theme of the program was “Lest We Forget,” which was also the title of an exhibit of portraits from the civil rights era that was on display at Mortensen Library through February (see “Portraits of Courage,” above).