EMPOWERING CHANGE

The University of Hartford has a long and rich history of supporting civil rights and equal opportunity for all. In 1959 the newly formed University invited a young Martin Luther King Jr. to speak in Hartford, Conn., on “The Future of Integration.” Over the years, the University has presented honorary degrees to more than two dozen African American leaders and trailblazers, including opera star Marian Anderson; tennis champion Arthur Ashe; NAACP Executive Director Benjamin Hooks; playwright August Wilson; Bayard Rustin, organizer of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom (where King gave his “I Have a Dream” speech); and, during the 2014 Commencement, Marian Wright Edelman, founder and president of the Children’s Defense Fund. The Martin Luther King Scholars program in the 1960s and the University’s current Hartford Scholars program have helped make the dream of college a reality for hundreds of Hartford residents. Today, 34 percent of the University’s undergraduate and graduate population are students of color, creating a rich and diverse campus community.

In September the University continued its tradition of promoting dialogue and action on civil rights and social change when it held a landmark, weeklong observance of the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Titled “Empowering Change,” the observance was designed to involve all University schools and colleges, students, and faculty in events that drew inspiration and insight from the past, and encouraged use of the lessons of the Civil Rights Movement to bring about change for today and the future.

“Empowering Change” brought to campus nationally known speakers, including civil rights leaders Ruby Sales, Robert Moses, and Eva Jefferson Paterson. Also in attendance were those who broke barriers—Guion Bluford, the first African American astronaut in space, and Elizabeth Horton Sheff M’12, Hon’13, the named plaintiff in Sheff v. O’Neill, the landmark civil rights lawsuit that resulted in a mandate to provide equal access to quality, integrated public education in Connecticut. Students gave stirring performances of words and music from the civil rights era, expressions of their thoughts through colorful sidewalk art, and speeches about ways that they can make a difference for the future. Faculty members joined with journalists, authors, and activists to examine civil rights and social change through the lenses of many different disciplines, including education and healthcare, business, and technical innovation.

The weeklong program coincided with a previously planned reunion of African American alumni, in honor of the 50th anniversary of the student organization known at various times as Black People’s Union (BPU), African American Students Association (AASA), and Brothers and Sisters United (BSU). During the reunion, African American alumni joined current members of BSU for panel discussions, networking receptions, and a tour of campus. The tour ended with a ceremony recognizing past student activism that had resulted in the naming of several residence halls in honor of prominent civil rights leaders.

DeLois Traynum Lindsey, assistant vice president for student development and director of multicultural programs, said, “This was a chance for current students and alumni across five decades to come together and touch the living history of an organization that has given much to the University of Hartford.”

“Empowering Change,” which was supported by Newman’s Own Foundation, was spearheaded by Robert Forrester, president and CEO of Newman’s Own and a University of Hartford alumnus and regent. The University event was held a week after the opening of a landmark exhibition at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., titled The Civil Rights Act of 1964: The Long Road to Freedom, which is also supported by Newman’s Own Foundation. The University awarded an honorary degree to James Billington, librarian of Congress, at the culminating event.

See more at hartford.edu/change.

AT RIGHT:
1 In the Hartford Hawks Multi-Sport Youth Clinic held during “Empowering Change,” young children from the community learned new skills from University student-athletes with a little help from the Hawk.
2 Fifty-seven students entered the “Voices for Change” essay contest, in which they were asked to write about a lesser-known civil rights leader. The five student finalists (left to right) were Zephy Strasser ’16, Anna Pan ’15, Christina Pakalupu ’16, Ruby Nightingale ’15, and Colin Worrich ’17. Nightingale won for her presentation on poet and activist Audre Lorde. Civil rights leader Ruby Sales (seated at right) was the guest speaker at the event, and ESPN’s Bob King (at the podium) served as emcee. The contest was sponsored by WELFund and the SGA.
3 Events planned for Brothers and Sisters United’s 50th anniversary were included in the “Empowering Change” program. Current members of BSU led alumni on a tour of campus that featured drumming.
4 The University’s Hartford Art School encouraged students to draw their dreams, in pictures and in words, on the sidewalks outside Gengras Student Union.
5 Robert Moses (standing), a civil rights leader and founder of The Algebra Project, and Eva Jefferson Paterson, a civil rights attorney and cofounder of the Equal Justice Society, were among the panelists who discussed “Civil Rights: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow” on the closing night of “Empowering Change.”
6 Educators, policymakers, and healthcare providers addressed ways to ensure equal access to quality education and healthcare during a panel discussion sponsored by the University’s College of Education, Nursing and Health Professions (ENHP). Pictured (left to right) are moderator Diane Orson of WNPR, State Senator Beth Bye; Györi Nguonou, chief of staff, Hartford Public Schools; More Spivey, vice president of health equity, Connecticut Hospital Association; and ENHP faculty members Kenny Nienhusser, John Tapper, and Karen O’Dangle.
7 Panelists talked about ways to address discrimination in a discussion titled “What Would You Do?,” sponsored by the University’s College of Arts and Sciences (A&S). The panel included (left to right) Marissa Lawrence ’16, a University of Hartford student and copresident of Warnen for Change; Cheryl Sharp, deputy director, Connecticut Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities; Elizabeth Horton Sheff M’12, Hon’13, community activist and plaintiff in the landmark Sheff v. O’Neill education lawsuit; and Rabbi Stanley Kessler, a former civil rights Freedom Rider. The moderator for the discussion was Warren Goldstein, professor and chair of the history department, A&S.
8 Regents Commons in the Shaw Center, Hillier Hall, was filled to capacity for the Music and Poetry for Social Change program, organized by Hillier faculty members Joyce Anshuntantang and Anthony Rauche.
9 Robert Forrester, president and CEO of Newman’s Own Foundation, which supported “Empowering Change,” was one of the speakers at a panel discussion titled “Business as Leaders of Social Change,” sponsored by the University’s Barney School of Business.
10 On the final night of “Empowering Change,” the University of Hartford presented an honorary degree to James Billington, librarian of Congress. The Library of Congress had previously opened a landmark exhibition in Washington, D.C., titled The Civil Rights Act of 1964: The Long Road to Freedom. Pictured are Billington (left) and University President Walter Harrison.
11 The University’s College of Engineering, Technology, and Architecture (CETA) hosted a program that looked at the role of technological innovation in creating social change. The event featured remarks from Guion S. Bluford Jr., the first African American astronaut to travel in space. In addition, four organizations were honored for their contributions to empowering change. Pictured, from left, are CETA Dean Louis Manzanas; Bluford; Michael Ritter of Pratt & Whitney; Peter Stevins of JCI Architecture; Jeff Brown of Newman’s Own Foundation; and Hisham Anajag, CETA associate dean and director of the Connecticut Space Grant Consortium, who represented NASA.
12 Audience members held hands and sang “We Shall Overcome” during the final night’s program. They were led by students from the University’s Hartford School.