Returning to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day in the 2000 Utah State Legislature

Senator Karen Hale, Member, Utah State Senate

As I look back on my time in the Utah State Senate, there is one particular day that marks one of the most memorable of my legislative experiences.

Senator Karen Hale

The annual neighborhood youth fundraising letter arrived in my mailbox a few weeks ago. The young people in our neighborhood raise money by placing U.S. flags in front of homes on certain legal holidays. As I read over the holidays to be observed by the youth flag brigade, I stopped at “Human Rights Day.” I took out my red pen, crossed out the words and wrote “Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.”

“That, my friends,” I thought to myself, “has been decided.”

The decision to rename the holiday in Utah didn’t just happen, nor did it come without hard work and emotion. Since the first observance of a federal holiday to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on January 20, 1986 – President Ronald Reagan signed the bill creating the federal holiday in 1983 – legislators in Utah and several other states had been wrangling over the name of the holiday. Many Utah legislators believed the observance, established to honor the legacy of Dr. King, should rightfully bear the name of the civil rights leader. Many more legislators, however, voiced strong sentiment against a holiday named after King, opting instead to call the observed holiday “Human Rights Day.”

The decision to rename the holiday in Utah didn’t just happen, nor did it come without hard work and emotion. Since the first observance of a federal holiday to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on January 20, 1986 – President Ronald Reagan signed the bill creating the federal holiday in 1983 – legislators in Utah and several other states had been wrangling over the name of the holiday. Many Utah legislators believed the observance, established to honor the legacy of Dr. King, should rightfully bear the name of the civil rights leader. Many more legislators, however, voiced strong sentiment against a holiday named after King, opting instead to call the observed holiday “Human Rights Day.”

At the beginning of the Utah State Legislature’s 2000 General Session, the fact that Utah was the only remaining state not to recognize the holiday by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s name was very much on the minds of legislators. With painful memories of lawmakers’ past attempts to rename the holiday (King’s widow, Coretta Scott King, visited Salt Lake City in 1986 with the hopes of celebrating passage of a bill to name the holiday after her late husband), Senator Pete Suazo and Representative Duane Bourdeaux were determined to make the change.

A few weeks into the session, Bourdeaux’s House Bill 306 had passed 6 - 4 in a House committee and, in the Senate, the Rules Committee had recommended that Suazo’s Senate Bill 121, “Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day,” go directly to the Senate calendar for a time certain vote on February 8.

The date of the vote arrived. The Senate gallery began to fill with supporters of the bill – representatives from the League of Women Voters and other civic groups, various churches and ethnic communities. Soon there was no more room in the gallery. Supporters filled the halls outside the Senate chambers. Officers of the NAACP, other long-time proponents of the MLK holiday, Senate staff and interns spilled onto the chamber floor.

Senator Suazo began to speak. The mood of the Senate was solemn and respectful. The packed chamber and gallery were hushed as Senator Suazo spoke eloquently about Dr. King’s great contributions. He spoke of King’s advocacy of civil rights, dedication to the principles of freedom and equality, and philosophy of non-violent resistance to injustice. The passage of this bill, Suazo stressed, was more than simply approving the appropriate name of the holiday. Passage of the bill would represent the values we, as a state, espoused. Passage of the bill would confirm Utahns’ belief and agreement with King that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

The roll call vote of the senators came. The bill passed 28-1. Tears and cheers erupted as we embraced one another. That moment – celebratory yet solemn – marked what would be one of the most significant moments of my legislative experience. The bill was not monumental in the fiscal sense; there was no fiscal impact to the state with the passage of SB 121. The bill was not epic in terms of policy; public policy was not affected. Yet the subtleties of the bill spoke loudly. The bill was monumental in the power of its expression on that winter’s day in February of 2000, an expression of unity, concern for the oppressed, and appreciation for the achievements of a man who made a difference. And, for me, there was a realization that within the walls of a legislative chamber, warmth, respect and genuine sense of purpose can truly find a place.
FINAL WORD

“Responsibilities gravitate to the man who knows how.”

—ROBERT H. HINCKLEY