

First of all, I want to take this opportunity to thank County Executive Kittleman and Dr. Sands for believing in me, and for allowing me the chance to serve with such esteemed members of the Howard County community on the Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday Commission. My first encounter with Mr. Kittleman was about three years ago, when I wrote an award-winning feature story for the school newspaper on the history of desegregation in Howard County schools. In it, I recounted some of the heroes of that time, who fought for what was right. Among them, was Dr. Sands and her husband, and Mr. Kittleman's father, Robert.

In his statement on the events of that time, County Executive Kittleman said, "My dad did what he did not because he thought we'd remember and praise him 50 years later, but because he knew it was right... He's the example I think of every time I face a question that demands courage to do what's right, and what may be unpopular."

I, too, look to both ordinary and extraordinary heroes that have passed, and continue to pass through our communities, as reasons to hope for a better future, indeed a better America, even in the current rancorous political environment. This is why the commission is so important.

Social justice and equality has been on my mind for years. Last year in an op-ed I posited that we are dismembering and diminishing the immense power of our global community by isolating group after group, saddling them with stereotypes and negative caricatures of themselves. It will be impossible to connect and progress as a society if we accept the idea of a hierarchy of power, organized by races and religions, or placing one group as superior or more righteous over another.

I have had the pleasure of competing internationally, where I have spoken to young women from countries I didn't even know existed (like Kyrgyzstan), and what was made clear to me is that the most important label that we all need to understand, is that of being human.

As individuals, we can be our best selves, and we can strive to be examples for other youth and adults who are living in a time in which lines are being so thickly drawn between races, cultures, and religions. We cannot stand upon or accept those lines. We have to draw a circle: one that encompasses everyone, and that is the message that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. so powerfully espoused, for which he lived... and died. It would be my privilege to help carry this message on, to celebrate not only our similarities as members of our local and global community, but also the differences and diversity that, I believe, make us stronger.

Thank you