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Local church leaders call on 'mentors'



Jason Hill, 8, delivered Dr. King's "I have a dream" speech. Photo by Teresa Flores

By: [Robert Rogers](#) | January 16, 2011 – 10:35 pm

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With Martin Luther King, Jr. Day approaching on Jan. 17, civic and religious leaders and youth groups launched a program designed to provide mentorship to local kids.

On Thursday night more than 100 people gathered at Bethlehem Missionary Baptist Church in Richmond to kick off the program, called "Mentoring 4 Martin." The program is part of a larger effort to tamp down local violence and reduce drop-out rates by pairing young people with mentors who will help them negotiate the obstacles of growing up in one of California's most challenged communities.

"Ultimately, we intend to bring an adult mentor to every young person in this community," said Rev. Alvin Herring of Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community (CCISCO), the faith-based regional coalition organizing the effort.

Herring said about 50 youths and 25 adult mentors were already enrolled in the program. He added that the idea is in part a response to the rape of a 16-year-old girl near Richmond High School in 2009.

"There was a community outpouring. People were distressed, angry and uncertain

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how to proceed," Herring said. "What we did was work with community leaders and average residents to shape a program that would ensure that no child in Richmond would have to face these tough streets without a caring mentor."

Mentors will be volunteers from all walks of life, including local government workers and local business owners, Herring said.

The program comes during a time of relative progress in the city's long struggle with violent crime. Last year, 21 people were slain in local homicides, less than half the total in 2009. But fewer than a quarter of those homicides were solved, according to police records, and just a few days ago the city suffered its first homicide of 2011 when a 16-year-old boy was shot to death in broad daylight.

Thursday night's gathering was not in response to the January 10 slaying, but was intended to lead up to next week's holiday celebrating the life of the famed civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The church was host to more than 100 people, including civic leaders Mayor Gayle McLaughlin, Police Capt. Mark Gagan and City Manager Bill Lindsay.

"I think (the program) will reduce violence. That's what this is about," McLaughlin said.

Rev. Alvin Bernstine delivered the keynote address, which echoed the theme of enlightened, local public service. "Dr. King would probably frown upon all these monuments and all these streets named in his behalf. He would want to be remembered as someone who tried to help somebody," Bernstine said. "We honor the dream of Dr. King when we connect vision-filled young people with dream-filled adults."

But the biggest splash was made by 8-year-old Jason Hill, who donned a gray suit and strode to the lectern, where he and recited Dr. King's most famous speech in its entirety.

"Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty we are free at last!" Hill shouted in a crescendo that drew a standing ovation.

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