

## Warren

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### Focus on ‘wheels of freedom’ at MLK dinner

1,000-plus attend ICRJ’s Silver MLK Holiday Celebration of Macomb County Jan. 16.

**By Brian Louwers**  
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WARREN — When waves of Freedom Riders hopped buses into the Deep South in 1961 looking to force the issue of desegregated interstate travel with non-violent resolve, the Rev. Richard Gleason was there.

Then a fiery 24-year-old white minister, raised in the rural Midwest and called to serve the hopeless living in Chicago’s public housing projects, Gleason crashed the “colored” waiting room in Jackson, Miss., and ended up in jail.

More than 50 years later, he found himself on stage at The Royalty House in Warren, sharing his story with a crowd of more than 1,000 in attendance for the 2012 MLK Holiday Silver Anniversary Celebration of Macomb County.

The dinner, marking its 25th year, was hosted by the Interfaith Center of Racial Justice. The evening featured remarks from leaders including U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow and songs by the Detroit Children’s Choir and the MLK Holiday Choir, featuring members of New Haven’s Greater New Hope Missionary Baptist Church.

The Rev. Michail Curro, executive director of the ICRJ, said the central theme for the event, “Keeping the Wheels of Freedom Turning,” bridged the group’s message of preserving and furthering Martin Luther King Jr.’s legacy with the 50th anniversary of the Freedom Rides.



Photo by David Schreiber  
The Rev. Richard Gleason, a Freedom Rider, offered remarks during a discussion about the civil rights actions of the 1960s and the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.

“Moved by this, we wanted to use tonight’s program to inform more people about this remarkable chapter of the civil rights movement,” Curro said. “We hoped to encourage a Freedom Rider to come and serve as our keynote speaker. In addition, we wanted to not just ask folks to look back, but also to look forward. Emerging was the idea, sparked by the Freedom Riders, to keep the wheels of freedom moving forward.”

Gleason, now 75, knew King personally. He marched with him and his supporters in Chicago and across the south, and was eyewitness to some of the most memorable moments at the vanguard of the struggle for racial equality in the 1960s.

He shared poignant memories of King with those assembled. He recalled a dinner party that King attended at the home of gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, where they dined on her homemade Louisiana gumbo and casually enjoyed Japanese plum wine. The evening’s celebratory vibe was silenced briefly as he remembered a 1966 civil rights march in Chicago’s Marquette Park where things turned ugly.

“When we arrived, over 20,000 white people were jeering, hollering, throwing firecrackers, bottles, bricks, and Dr. King got hit in the head with a brick,” Gleason said. “And his aide said, ‘Doctor! Doctor! Doctor!’ He said, ‘No.’”

“I saw in him then, not, he didn’t have the illusion of everything’s going to be cool. I sort of sensed that he understood this was his destiny. And after he was hit in the head with a brick, Dr. King said, ‘Let’s go forward.’ And he did.”

Asked by event emcee Roop Raj of WJBK Fox 2 to offer a message about Dr. King for today’s young people, Gleason was quick and to the point.

“Dr. King was only 5 foot 6 1/2 inches tall. The giant of a man, who inspired me and countless others, was a giant at 5 foot 6 inches tall,” Gleason said. “You don’t have to be big to make a difference.”

Those in attendance at the dinner were thanked for their support of a collection drive for personal care items. Curro said the things that cannot be purchased with food stamps or a Bridge Card would be distributed to the working poor through the HOPE Center in Fraser.

The winners of the ICRJ’s “Keeping the Wheels of Freedom Moving Forward” art contest were also announced. Chippewa Valley High School’s Dayvonta’ Howard’s drawing depicting King, President Barack Obama and a young girl described as the “past, present and future” took first place and was featured on the cover of the event’s program. Jessica Sharkey from Henry Ford II High School took second place, and Gianna Dilisio took third place in the contest.

More information about the art contest, the MLK dinner, and the ICRJ — including the Listen, Learn, & Live diversity education program — can be found online at [www.icrj.org](http://www.icrj.org).