

# Building a bridge to somewhere

The past year has seen the passing of two great icons of the civil rights movement — Rosa Parks and Coretta Scott King. Their funerals have been moments for reflections on the past, including the bravery Parks showed when she challenged a segregated bus system in the 1950s and the often

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underappreciated leadership role Mrs. King played in the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s.

But as President Bill Clinton said at the funeral for Mrs. King, "I don't want us to forget that there's a

woman in there, not a symbol — not a symbol — a real woman who lived and breathed and got angry and gut hurt and had dreams and disappointments." Likewise, in an era when legalized segregation has been largely banished and the images of brutal Southern police play in grainy black and white on the History Channel, it may be easy to forget that there are real and living civil rights issues for our own times.

The continuing realities of difference were brought to us in vivid color when Hurricane Katrina slammed against the Gulf Coast in August. The disaster may have been an act of God, but the unequal outcomes that splashed across America's television screens were a result of human action and inaction. The most vulnerable neighborhoods in New Orleans — both because of their exposure to floods and their lack of private transport — were largely black and poor, and Americans rightly took offense at seeing fellow citizens left behind in a storm.

But Katrina calls for more than anger at governmental incompetence: The disaster opened a window on a daily world of hurt that goes far beyond the South. In California, for

example, African-Americans and Latinos generally live in more polluted neighborhoods, send their children to schools of lesser quality, and see larger numbers of their youth incarcerated. In our own Santa Cruz County, Latino household income is only 55 percent of Anglo households, a ratio that is only partially explained by recency of immigration and one that ranks us as the third most unequal of California's 20 medium-size counties (counties with populations greater than 100,000 and less than 500,000).

The tools of the past, including litigation and marches, are not enough to move the needle on these numbers and these conditions. The civil right issues of the 21st century involve educational equity, environmental justice and economic opportunity, and getting to justice on all these fronts involves both new coalitions and new work on institutional transformation.

How do we build a bridge to both the values of the past and the challenges of the future? We in Santa Cruz will get a deep view into the continuity of change as we end Black History Month with a Martin Luther King convocation that includes two of today's leading civil rights leaders: Keith Beauchamp, the filmmaker drawing acclaim for his documentary "The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till," and Angela Glover Blackwell, founder and chief executive officer of the national advocacy group PolicyLink.

Beauchamp is a young filmmaker who grew up in Baton Rouge hearing about Emmett Till, a 14-year-old African-American who was killed in Mississippi in 1955 for whistling at a white woman. Till's death and the acquittal of his murderers by an all-white jury outraged a nation and helped to catalyze the civil right movements that Martin Luther King went on to lead. "It's my obligation to tell this story, as a young individual in this country, as a young person from my generation," Beauchamp has said in interviews. "It's important that we never forget those that pave the way for us to exist in a

free society." And his efforts, along with those of Till's mother and others, have resonated: the Justice Department helped open a new criminal investigation into the murder.

Building a bridge to the past is important, and so is identifying the issues of the future. Angela Glover Blackwell began her career as a public interest lawyer, but now heads a nonprofit, PolicyLink, whose stated mission is to "lift up what works." Focused on stirring community development, closing the digital divide and training new multiracial leadership, Blackwell is dedicated to the multi-sector collaborations that can move real change, and she understands that America wants possibilities and not just protest. Among PolicyLink's numerous projects is an advisory role in the Louisiana Recovery Authority to ensure that the slow-motion social disaster that affects so many low-income communities of color does get replicated in the rebuilding of the Gulf Coast.

The convocation, 7 p.m. Tuesday at the Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium, represents a unique opportunity to celebrate the life and legacy of Martin Luther King not as a memory but as a road map to a better America. Taking the message of constant values and changing struggles to our local community also may help us find new common ground on addressing disparities here at home, particularly as we tackle the new and often thorny civil-rights issues of land use, economic development and school performance. It is a message we think Dr. and Mrs. King would have liked, not just an appreciation of history but a "call to action" that can bring the prism of justice to today's realities and tomorrow's challenges.

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