2022 Martin Luther King Day Essay Contest
sponsored by Africana Studies and College of FHSS

1st place tie – Taylor Munlin
(Communications major, Africana Studies minor from Dallas, Texas)

Allie Oniki
(Elementary Education major from South Jordan, Utah)

3rd place - Nori Gomez
(Sociology major from Maracay, Venezuela)
On September 28, 2021, Martin Luther King III gave a forum address at Brigham Young University about “creating a beloved community.” Near the end of his speech, he admonished the BYU community to “rise up” –

“Rise up,” King concluded, “and take a stand against poverty, racism, war and violence. Rise up with an unwavering determination to reclaim our environment from the ravages of industrial pollution. Rise up and lead nonviolent movements to feed the hungry. Rise up and use your economic power to support a culture of nonviolence. Rise up and work for peace, dignity and human rights for all people in every nation. Rise up in a vibrant spirit of justice, compassion and love, united and determined to create a better America and world, where people of all races, religions and nations can live together as sisters and brothers in peace and harmony.” (“Martin Luther King III Teaches How to Build a ‘Beloved Community,’” Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints newsroom, September 28, 2021; https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/martin-luther-king-iii-byst-form-2021)

Considering King’s words, write an essay of 777 words or less on how you plan to “rise up” to create a “beloved community.”

Submit your essay between Dec 3, 2021 and Jan 5, 2022, 11:59 pm to: africanabyu@gmail.com as a Word attachment. Please include the following information with your submission: your name, year in school, major, minor(s), home town, email address, and phone number.

The first-place winner will receive $500 and the opportunity to read their essay at BYU’s MLK Walk of Life Commemoration on Wednesday January 19, 2022. The second and third place winners will receive $300 and $150, respectively. (Previous first-place winners are not eligible for the same award in consecutive years.) Questions about the essay contest can be directed to the above email or to Dr. Leslie Hadfield leslie_hadfield@byu.edu, the Africana Studies Coordinator.
Jesus Walks with Me

Jesus walks with me. He follows me to anti-racism lectures and peaceful protests of injustices. He is with me as I write to administrations about reform and as I send condolences to the families of victims of police brutality. He runs the 2.23 miles with me in honor of the lynching of Ahmaud Arbery and He mourns next to me at candlelight vigils for Breonna Taylor. He also wonders where her justice is. I know that He sits with me as I cry over the hurt and pain that myself and many others face, but it is better when I am walking and He walks with me.

Jesus walks with them. He roams with those scouring the streets all day wondering where their next meal will come from. He stands with those working eighty hours a week in underappreciated jobs to support their families. He is hunted and herded up like an animal with the families seeking asylum and opportunities in a foreign place. He lays down with the sick afflicted in their beds and hears their every prayer and hope for a brighter future. The resilience of “them” who keep moving despite all odds is not lost to Him. Jesus walks with those who are tossed aside and forgotten.

Jesus walks with you. He wakes up with you in the morning of another year in a global pandemic. He reads all of the articles on how to be an anti-racist with you. Jesus scrolls through your past messages with you as you wonder how what you said has hurt someone else. He knows that was not your intention. He cries with you as you become overwhelmed with story after story of injustice and despair. He gets excited with you when something finally clicks and you’re able to share with others. He will always sit beside you as you take time to learn and process, but Jesus can’t walk with you if you are always sitting down.

Jesus walks with me. He walks with them. He walks with you. He walks with us.

Building a Zion community requires a whole lot of Jesus and a whole lot of us. Jesus does in fact see color. He helped create it and that is not something He wants anybody to overlook. Building Zion is not forgetting that we all look different and have different backgrounds. Zion is built through action. We acknowledge our differences and the way that certain characteristics leave more communities vulnerable to inequalities and we actively participate in ways to change this.

He knows each one of us personally and is not a discriminator of gender, social class, nationality, religion, socioeconomic status, political affiliation or sexuality. The king and the beggar plead the same. No one in this life has control over what situation they were born into. We as imperfect beings trying to establish Zion, a beloved community, do have control over how we treat others and how we react. We cannot expect to build Zion without actually building.
Sitting and drawing up plans on how to create a beloved community is great but until each person does their part to lay a brick, nothing will get done. A community cannot be built off of the backs of a few individuals, it needs to include everyone.

Befriending people of different backgrounds, forming committees, listening to panels and reading books are all the bare minimum in a Zion community. I recognize my own pride in learning about other groups of people that I am not a part of. It is not enough to care. It is not enough for me to simply listen. It is comfortable for me but a beloved community cannot be built while I am comfortable. We all need to be uncomfortable. Be as uncomfortable as someone who has to wear the same clothes everyday because that’s all they can afford. Be as uncomfortable as a person getting called an alien and being separated from their family. Be as uncomfortable as someone who gets paid half their worth because of their gender or ethnicity. Be as uncomfortable as a Black student hearing a slur in their classroom and not having any student or professor say anything about it. Be as uncomfortable as people were when they marched for their basic rights and some sixty years later still seeing their children and grandchildren marching for the same things. We need to get uncomfortable.

Jesus will sit beside us at lectures, as we hear the experiences of others and as we form committees. Sitting is great and a necessary part of our beloved community but Jesus is ready to get up and build with us. I plan to continue to write to institutions seeking changes. I plan to continue to speak up for those around me. I plan to continue to encourage those around me to not only listen and learn but get up and walk. Jesus walks with us; therefore, we cannot fail. The only failure is continuing to sit.
Crabs, Ants, and Building the Beloved Community

Allie Oniki

Crab mentality. Maybe you have heard about it in psychology class; maybe you have seen it firsthand while on a fishing trip with your grandpa. Either way, the lesson learned is this: if you put crabs into a basket, you don’t need a lid. Yes, the crabs will try to escape, but as one begins to scurry up and out, the other crabs from down below will grab it and pull it back down. Down they will fall, together, to the bottom of the basket.

We may look at these crabs and think, “How pitiful. Crabs are so dense.” And yet, we so often do the same thing to our fellow sisters and brothers. We think we are the only ones who should be at the top of the basket, and anyone else trying should be put back in their place. With every snide comment, with every, “They deserve to be on the streets,” “They are taking our jobs,” “They are stealing our social security,” “They think they can make a difference,” we are reaching out a metaphorical pincer and dragging down anyone and everyone who is trying to make it in this world. And the real kicker is, we stay right at the bottom of the basket with those we’ve dragged down.

Unlike crabs, ants have mastered the art of working in unity. When ants are walking along in a line and they come across a gap in their path, the ants in front will turn themselves into a bridge so that those following behind will be able to get across. If you were to put ants in a basket, they would not stay there long.

When Martin Luther King III came to BYU and asked us to “rise up and build the beloved community”, he surely did not mean it in terms of rising the way crabs try to. He explained that the beloved community is a place where “people of every race, religion and nation live together in peace and harmony and work together for the common progress of humankind.”
The beloved community is full of service and the healing of broken hearts and listening with no intent to judge. It is full of people who are sacrificing so that their brothers and sisters can cross difficult obstacles. It is full of ants.

If the beloved community is our destination, the gaping hole in front of us is huge. The world is in distress. There’s poverty and hunger and racism and sexism and homophobia and bigotry and global warming and a global pandemic. Where do we start? What can one tiny ant even do?

When I get overwhelmed at all the fixing that is to be done, I’m reminded of a quote by author Glennon Doyle, who said, “Where is the pain in the world that you just cannot stand? Stand there. The thing that breaks your heart is the very thing you were born to help heal. Every world changer’s work begins with a broken heart.” This is what we can do. We can find what breaks our own little hearts. We can start there.

For me, my heart breaks at the thought of refugees and immigrants, who are being so courageous and bold on behalf of their families by taking them to a country that is advertised as a giver of a better life, and then are received coldly. They come here and start with nothing. Then they are often accused of taking the jobs or the homes or the success that belong to someone else. Instead of dragging them down in this way, I want to be a builder. I am beginning to teach English online to refugees so that they can have another resource for success—another steppingstone across the hole for them. I am going to be an advocate for them always. I’m going to do as Martin Luther King III said, and “take [my] love for [my] fellow citizens and [my] love for America to the ballot box, where it counts.”

My efforts are small. Yours might be small. We might at times feel like we are not making a difference and that no one can make a difference and that the distance between us and
the sky and beautiful world awaiting us on the other side of the basket is too far. But we can do it. If we each receive inspiration from our broken hearts and then lift each other up, we can do it. We can be ants. We can build this beloved community.
Noriadnys Gomez
Junior majoring in Sociology, minoring in Non-Profit Management with an emphasis in Social Impact
Hometown: Maracay, Venezuela

I, too, am BYU

There’s a poem by Langston Hughes whose words have always stirred me. It tells the story of the darker, unwanted slave brother that is never allowed a seat at the table and ends with the words, “I, too, am America.” I think of this poem every time I feel powerless, excluded, and like I don’t belong. I am the unwanted, undocumented sister. I’ve pledged allegiance to the same flag almost my entire life, and yet have not earned my seat at the table. And yet I, too, am America; I, too, have a dream. My story is not the only one of sorrow, exclusion, and alienation. We’ve been denied a seat at the table time and time again, but I’m no longer satisfied with being left out. I’m making a seat for myself and people like me, even if it means we have to build it ourselves.

When struggles come your way, you don’t always recognize the systems causing the struggles until you connect with others facing the same problem. I remember the high school counselor who told me I would never make it to a school like BYU, the college professor who said all immigrants come to the United States to abuse the system, and the lack of support I found once I transferred to BYU looking for a safe haven. I searched for support and found none, instead I found a community. I learned about the student who was turned away by enrollment services because of being undocumented. I learned about the student whose undocumented parents are dedicating their work to pay for his tuition so he doesn’t have to. I learned about the student whose father was deported when he was eleven years old. This community has taught and empowered me.

Somedays I feel I have found the beloved community, but most days we are the broken and heavy-laden community. I fight the systems that oppress us by raising my voice. I may not be able to vote, but I can do everything within my power to change the minds of the people that can. I have lobbied with the Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) to Mitt Romney, Mike Lee, and John Curtis. When my mom was turned away from getting medicine at a pharmacy as a result of her Utah Driver Privilege, I called then-representative Ben McAdams and asked him to review the policies surrounding the privileges. I worked at an immigration law firm for a year helping individuals through their legal processes and the emotional burdens of waiting for good news. I have spoken at the Women’s March Provo on Pioneer Day about my experiences as a Dreamer. When I noticed a current Utah Senate candidate was meeting with members of the community, I arranged a meeting for her to meet with undocumented members of the BYU community. I co-wrote and published an article in the Deseret News about the need for a path to citizenship. I traveled to California to learn from the experiences of the giants who have come before me as part of the Latinx Civil Rights Seminar. I traveled to Washington D.C. to be present at the Supreme Court arguments on DACA. I am in the presidencies of the antiracism club and Hispanos Unidos. I work as a Dreamer liaison on campus to create events and resources for students. I spend my days looking for the avenues in which my voice can be heard hoping that I can touch even the heart of one person who can do more.

I wonder how much good my efforts have made, if it’s enough. At times the dream feels so distant, but what keeps me grounded and gives me hope is seeing how fighting for this community has
changed me and the people who work beside me. We have been made into better more loving people because of the struggles we share. We have created a small beloved community, and through our efforts hope to invite everyone in.