

MLK's daughter seeks nonviolent Ferguson response

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FERGUSON, Mo. (RNS)—The youngest child of Martin Luther King Jr. leaned toward 30 students facing her inside the library at Riverview Gardens High School. Many of them live near the epicenter of the chaos that erupted in Ferguson. It's why Bernice King chose this school for this discussion.



Bernice King, CEO of The King Center in Atlanta and daughter of the late Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., speaking at the Newseum on Aug. 22, 2013. (RNS photo by Adelle M. Banks) The students seemed curious about this visitor, whose late father led the marches and protests that they've read about in class. But before she arrived, a school district administrator asked for a show of hands of those who thought nonviolent protests and peaceful resistance used during the American civil rights movement remain relevant in light of Ferguson. Only one hand shot up.

King is aware of this disconnect.

“My dad’s legacy is on the line,” King told the students. “If this doesn’t turn out the right way, it could begin to have people question what happened years ago.”

Fears a return of violence

King believes the community is at a critical moment as it continues to confront the police shooting death of 18-year-old Michael Brown. And as it is for the students she addressed, much of her concern is centered on the violence that may return as the legal process moves forward.

“If he’s not indicted, what’s going to happen?” asked Justin Fowler, a senior, referring to Darren Wilson, the officer who shot Brown.

“You tell me. You live here,” King said. “That’s the big question out there right now. So what’s going to happen?”

“Everything will go bad,” he said.

Defenders of Wilson say he shot Brown in self-defense. The fear that a grand jury may not indict him is why King and others with the [King Center](#) in Atlanta arrived in the St. Louis area, listening to groups of youths to determine the best way to advocate nonviolence.

Channeling anger

They plan to develop a relationship with Riverview Gardens students, who are predominantly African-American and live closest to the unrest. The King Center officials hope to develop a strategy to help young people channel their anger in a nonviolent way, defusing a potentially explosive situation if the investigation doesn’t produce the results that many hope for.

“That part is out of our hands,” King said of the investigation. “We’ve got to find a way to not make it worse. ... We can’t destroy each other. We’re all we’ve got. We’ve got to band together as a community. But we’ve also got to wipe out the ‘us-and-them’ mentality.”

The Ferguson situation has worn on the students who met with King. They are the leaders of Riverview Gardens High—captains of the football team, class officers, members of junior ROTC.

Some also live in the Canfield Green apartments, along the street where Brown was shot. D’Aja Washington, a sophomore, is friends with Brown’s sister.

Some have participated in the protests on West Florissant Avenue. Some have gone there to hand out water. Some stayed home, where they still couldn’t escape the sounds of violence at night.

A generational disconnect

Those who participated in the civil rights marches of Martin Luther King Jr.’s era have had trouble connecting with the young people on the streets of Ferguson this month who see the 1960s as irrelevant. Bernice King tried to bridge that divide.

Her father, she said, “helped people channel that anger into something positive to bring about the change they were hoping for.”

“They saw tanks too,” she said. “You think this is the first time tanks have been in a community? It’s not. You all think this was the first time tear gas was used? It was used on my daddy—in Selma. Tear gas, tanks. So, really, you’ve got to start thinking: What is the vision you want to see come out of this? It’s got to be big. You’ve got to see well beyond this moment.”

Anger ‘just wants to destroy’

King was just 5 years old when her father was assassinated in 1968. She dealt with death throughout her childhood, losing her uncle to a drowning and her grandmother to a fatal shooting. Her anger built, turning into rage at times. She's since directed that energy into advocating the nonviolent philosophies of her father through the King Center.

"I don't know if you realize this, but anger is anger," she told the students. "It has no mind. It has no rationality. It's mad and it just wants to destroy. At the end of the day, you have to find a way to arrest that anger."

Ronada Hood, a senior, said she appreciated the conversation. The situation in Ferguson has made it more difficult for her to find a part-time job, since many of the businesses near where she lives have been looted and destroyed.

"The violence didn't solve anything," she said.