

## **Speech written and performed by High Rocks girls for Martin Luther King Day**

**January 16, 2012 – Lewisburg, WV**

High Rocks' mission is to educate, empower, and inspire young women in West Virginia. Martin Luther King Day is one of the wonderful opportunities we get as High Rocks girls to inspire our community. Last night we spent a lot of time talking about non-violence and the role it played in the Civil Rights movement. We hope that this speech furthers the great work of Dr. King.

Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebrates the birth of an incredible man –a dreamer, a visionary, and a revolutionary. On the third Monday of every January, we gather to celebrate the life of a man who played a lead role in the march towards equality. It is not just a celebration of the progression we've made since then, but a celebration of what we as humans can accomplish together in the future. We've come a long way since the days of Martin Luther King. Oppression and division are no longer the stark black and whites of the past. People have broken from the shackles that once reduced them to a classification on the sign of a water fountain or restroom.

As a society, we have accomplished many things since the civil rights movement of the 1960's. With the powerful hands of many, we have made abundant strides towards racial equality. In the education system, people of different races learn together. We learn about the heroes of different cultures and the histories of world politics.

In public places, there are no longer separated bathrooms, no longer two separate water fountains. In Martin Luther King's last effort to peacefully strike out against the unjust ways of the American life, he joined the sanitation workers of Memphis, Tennessee in a nonviolent protest and bolstered their declarations: I AM a man. Forty years later, WE are the PEOPLE, and amazingly enough we've been able to learn that together in schools. As a species, we have come closer to accepting that we are created equally, and that we deserve to be treated with dignity and respect, no matter our race, our gender, or anything else that makes us different or distinct.

We are closer, as a country, to living out the constitution that this nation was founded on. People of different races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, religious affiliations are protected by the law. Young people are more protected by the law in their schools and in their homes. This has not always been true! Even protesters are more protected under the law, which means we are freer to speak about what we believe in, whether or not it is in line with our government.

We celebrate this day knowing that thanks to Martin Luther King, and all the people who have joined the struggle for civil rights, we are more protected to believe what we want and stand up for what we believe in. In our own lives we have struggled to stop bullying, for better and

healthier food options in our school cafeterias and for more opportunities for young women in our community.

We have joined these struggles knowing that the people who have come before us helped to pave the way. They laid down many of the protections that allow us to speak up about what we believe in. This is why we celebrate the history of Martin Luther King.

But we are also here because there is still work to be done, because these systems and these protections do not always work. Intolerance is still a huge issue. For example, kids are bullied every day—for sexual orientation, their race, physical disabilities, religion, size, their intelligence, and the list goes on – no one is exempt, but we are protected by the laws civil rights workers have worked to create throughout the years.

Today, economic injustice has been affecting our lives and yours. Any person here could probably talk about the tremendous gap between the classes. Rich people are getting wealthier and poor people are becoming poorer. Every hard working person deserves financial stability. Every hard working person deserves a home. Every person who wants to work deserves a job. To keep the American Dream alive we have to keep Martin Luther King and his words alive in our hearts and in our actions.

Last night we studied a speech that Dr. King gave in 1957 called “Loving Your Enemies,” about the power of non-violent resistance. Many of us had to admit that at points in our lives we had acted out of anger or hatred. We acted this way because it felt powerful at the time. But it wasn’t. Hateful and violent action didn’t get us anywhere. And as King said, “Hate for hate only intensifies the existence of hate and evil in the universe. The strong person is the person that can cut off the chain of hate.” So when we, as students in this community are trying to stop abuse or intolerance, we want to be the strong person. We want to break loose from the oppressive chains of hatred. Because love, as tender and sweet as it can be, is a powerful tool. And this, in essence is the core of Martin Luther King’s life and work – he loved the men who hated him. He prayed for the men who spat on him. He worked to free all people from the destructive bonds of hatred.

In the documentary, “Roads to Memphis”, one of the aides to Dr. King made the comment that they were never worried about *who* killed Martin Luther King, but *what* killed him. In a society brimming with the possibility of change, *what* drove a man to kill the visionary who worked toward a society of peace and love? The answer, of course, was hate. Which is why we know today that we must build up the creative power of love and help each other break the bondage of anger.

In order to love others, we must first look into ourselves and love from the inside out. If we look into our own lives and find flaws, it becomes easier to love others despite theirs. And we must

understand that the only way we can change our flaws is to love ourselves. If we can realize this, we can understand that the only way to change other people—to teach them acceptance and appreciation for difference and uniqueness—is to love them too. We must try to discover the good in each other because, as Martin Luther King said, at the very root of love is transformation. Acting from love creates real change because it begins with understanding. Hatred might be easier to act from than love, at first, but hatred is a cycle that perpetuates violence and destruction that leaves all those trapped in it completely devastated.

As we begin the New Year, we choose to embrace the words of Dr. King and work to build one another up in our homes, communities, and our world. It will take much more strength to create a world of love than it would take to destroy it with hatred, but together, we can do it. We must not work to defeat one another. We must not seek to win at the expense of others. We must seek to learn from each other and to teach each other. And, just like Dr. King, we believe that unarmed trust and unconditional love will have the final word in our world.

Now, we would like to share part of a song written by three High Rocks girls on this stage. High Rocks is a culture in and of its own that practices the principles of unconditional love and the building of one another up. This song was written after a momentous hike at camp this summer, where each girl made it to the top of a mountain by taking the hand of another.