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Laila Sholtz-Ames

Dream of MLK, Jr. 'alive and well' at new UMaine plaza

Two years ago, I attended the annual University of Maine Martin Luther King, Jr. breakfast hosted by the NAACP. During the breakfast, Robert Dana and President Robert Kennedy spoke about creating a plaza garden to honor King and his wife, Coretta Scott King. Sitting at the breakfast two years ago, I didn't believe that such a thing would actually happen — that our university would actually pay homage to two of the greatest civil rights leaders of all time. If such a thing was actually created, I assumed it would be a small plaque placed outside the Memorial Union.

I was the President of the Black Student Union for two semesters and few people came to our events. The Black History Month speeches, presentations, debates and dinners were never well attended and shamefully enough, I have even heard students asking who King was and what he had to do with civil rights. I thought UMaine didn't care about multiculturalism and civil rights. So when Kennedy said a plaza would be created in 2008, I was skeptical at best. When construction started, I walked by the site every day and peered inside, unsure if it would ever actually be opened.

On Oct. 31, after two years, it did. I was excited to finally see the memorial. I walked to the Union for the opening ceremony, expecting to see a few people at the unveiling. Instead, I saw a large crowd gathered — people of all ages, races and backgrounds. There was music, poetry and speeches. The temperature dipped lower and lower, but

the heat and enthusiasm of the crowd grew warmer and stronger. I stood amazed as the large crowd supported a couple that fought for peace, equal rights and justice. When the plaza's inscription was unveiled, it read "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," and I thought it was fitting and appropriate. Here we are, in one of the whitest states in the U.S., and we have created a monument dedicated to these two amazing people.

I was impressed and pleased, and while constructing a monument is not going to cure the racism and ignorance we have in this state, it will go a long way toward educating the public and raising awareness about multiculturalism. It's not just about African-Americans; it's about fighting against hatred and prejudice for people of all races, religions and sexual orientations.

In the plaza, several quotes from the Kings are placed on stone pillars, surrounded by yellow and purple flowers. Looking around, I realized that the flowers wouldn't stay fresh. In fact, they are already dying. As of yesterday, people started writing with chalk on the plaza and I have seen pieces of litter tossed around the area. Regardless, the plaza is still standing and still represents everything that King worked so hard to create. Martin Luther King, Jr. died forty years ago, but it is clear that his dream is still alive and well. Moreover, we have a plaza to show it.

Laila Sholtz-Ames is a junior journalism student.