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Legacies of Martin Luther King Jr.

By Diane Curtis

You could hear a pin drop in the auditorium of the San Francisco Public Library last Saturday, January 15 -- the day Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. would have turned 76 -- as Claudette Colvin recounted growing up black in the segregated South.

In what was news to many in the standing-room-only audience, Colvin told of refusing to give up her bus seat to a white man on an afternoon in March 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama 274 days before Rosa Parks did the same thing in the same city. The hushed attention made clear that the 64-year-old woman made a strong impression on young (and not-so-young) minds during the presentation, which was just what the sponsor, the international educational and professional-development organization, Facing History and Ourselves, was after.

Colvin's talk was part of a touring multimedia exhibition, *Choosing to Participate: Facing History and Ourselves*, which includes presentations on the Web about the civil rights movement, photographs celebrating local people who made a difference in their community, and artwork by area students that speaks to the theme of becoming an active participant in a democratic society. The multimedia presentation includes a moving story of one black man's qualms about helping a white woman for fear he would be met with disdain or worse, personal stories of integrating Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957, and the efforts of some Montana citizens to battle hate crimes.



“Crisis in Little Rock, 1957.” © Will Counts



Many San Francisco Bay Area students took Colvin's story as a lesson in activism.

"It was phenomenal. It was exciting to hear what Ms. Colvin had to say," said Jamie, a junior at Menlo High School, in Menlo Park, whose artwork *Eye of the Storm* (pictured left) examines the dangers of indifference and was part of the accompanying exhibit, *pARTicipation: Visions and Voices of Bay Area Students*. On a blue background with an eye in the middle and a face floating in space, *Eye of the Storm* sends the message to "stand up for what you think is right and don't get lost in the eye of the storm, where everything seems calm, but chaos is surrounding you," writes Jamie in the description of her painting. Colvin, Jamie said, "motivated me to stand up for what I believe in."

“Eye of the Storm” © Jamie Hall

Such standing up, students said, can take many forms. Alyssa, 14, from Carlmont High School, in Belmont, said Colvin reconfirmed her dedication to picking up trash near the ocean. For "12 3/4"-year-old Matt, of Fremont, it meant speaking out about such issues as teacher pay and the need for the wealthy to pay their fair share. For 11-year-old Bridget, also of Fremont, it meant thinking of ways to bring people together, and considering what she would have done if she had been black and on the bus that day in 1955. "I would have stood up," she said.

"It's very moving when you hear a first-person account [of history] and realize that these are really ordinary people doing extraordinary things," said Nina Moore, a school board member from Fremont who helped bring Facing History and Ourselves to the Fremont Unified School District following the 9/11 attacks in 2001. One of the important aspects of the Facing History program, she noted, is that it "is not an add-on," but rather is integrated into history, English, or other subjects that students are already studying. The Fremont school district has used its curriculum to talk about issues of race in the community, which has the largest Afghan-American community in the United States.

Wendy Garner, a 12th-grade English and social-justice teacher at Amador Valley High School, in Pleasanton, who has used the Facing History and Ourselves approach for seven years, describes it as "learning how to be more humane," and she says it is the most sought-after program in her district.

"Kids feel it's a relevant, powerful curriculum that gives them a chance to talk about change and the potential to make a difference," said Garner. "It's not just historical dates. It talks about humane behavior." She added that she gets e-mail from former students, now in college, who feel grateful to have tackled some of the "tough topics" such as racism and community division. "They feel very empowered not just about learning the history but also about how they can apply what they learned and how they can be better people," Garner said.

Conversations like the one held on Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday, said Austin, a junior from James Logan High School, in Union City, make people reflect. "It makes people think about what happened, and it makes them think if they're still following his dream to make the world a better place."

To read more about how schools are using the Facing History and Ourselves curriculum, visit the Edutopia Web site (<http://www.edutopia.org>) and search for Facing History.

Diane Curtis is a longtime education writer.