

UMB News

Lessons of MLK Remain Relevant

February 14, 2024 | By [Jen Badie](#)

Despite the “extreme assault” on equity and justice in this country and the widespread feeling of despair because of it, we have to find a way to force ourselves to hold onto hope, [Fatima Goss Graves, JD](#), said during her keynote speech at the University of Maryland, Baltimore’s (UMB) Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Black History Month Celebration on Feb. 6.

This was the first lesson from King’s life that Goss Graves, president and CEO of the National Women’s Law Center, president of the National Women’s Law Center Action Fund, and co-founder of the TIME’S UP Legal Defense Fund, imparted to the crowd of more than 350 that she believes still applies today.



Fatima Goss Graves, JD

hiring process.

Goss Graves began her speech, “Hope Is a To-Do List: Beyond the Supreme Court’s Affirmative Action Rulings,” by describing the current climate amid the Supreme Court decision last year that the affirmative action programs at the University of North Carolina and Harvard University violated the 14th Amendment and the decision’s aftermath, such as public universities in Arizona eliminating the use of diversity statements in their

“The message that has been put forward is loud and clear. It’s that you’re not welcome here or maybe we’re not worthy of being here in the first place,” she said. “The season we are in at this point in history, the oppression we are facing, it is concrete, it is material, you can see it. It’s hard not to wonder if what we’re doing is actually making the sort of difference we need to make right now. And it is therefore hard not to give into the despair.”

Goss Graves went on to talk about a similar environment that the country faced in 1963 — the year civil rights activist Medgar Evers was murdered, four Black girls were killed in the bombing of a Birmingham, Ala., church, and Dr. King gave his “I Have a Dream” speech.

“Dr. King did not back down. He proclaimed that day and continued to proclaim, ‘I have a dream.’ So the question is, how is it in the face of violence and terror can you articulate a dream that this country had not yet realized?” she said. “He was so clearly a visionary. But also I believe he was pragmatic and practical and even political. In the midst of a giant backlash on the cusp of massive and generational change, he understood that giving hope was the best strategy available. Hope is the only emotion that keeps us moving as humans, it keeps us going. Hope is motivating. It is the only fuel for our endurance in this fight for justice.”

The second lesson Goss Graves discussed is that “the best way to sustain hope, especially when things feel hard, is to get into motion” as King did.

She said in the wake of the Supreme Court’s affirmative action decisions, universities should invest in diversity by helping first-generation students succeed and take school climate seriously by prioritizing anti-harassment and anti-discrimination efforts.

“We cannot be bullied, even if it is legal bullying, into shifting practices and policies that are perfectly consistent in the law,” Goss Graves said. “So instead — here comes the to-do list — this is a moment for colleges and universities to rededicate themselves to broader recruitment efforts to help ensure that underrepresented students of all identities can imagine success in your institutions and understand exactly how to make that happen. This is also a moment to think really hard about your admissions policies and practices.”

Goss Graves said the third lesson to take from Dr. King’s life is that “we will not live to see the better future that we’re all fighting for.”

“That’s because the fight for justice has always been one that is generational,” she said. “Dr. King knew this when he said, ‘The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.’ He did not live to see so many milestones, so many examples of his dream come to life.

“But I have always found great, great comfort in the truth that the fight we are in has and will span multiple generations. Because I know that my own liberation is a result of decisions that were made in my parents’ generation and that my ancestors before them made. And I know that the decisions that all of us make today, moving forward from today — within your campus, within your communities — our conversations will help dictate what the next 10 and 50 and 100 years look like for people in this country, for students on your campus.”

Goss Graves ended her speech by saying that when she looked into the crowd, she didn’t see despair but power.

“I know that all of you are here in this crowd because you are committed to Dr. King’s dream, to making that dream a reality no matter the backlash, no matter how long, no matter how many generations it takes. Being in your presence, being among your power, it honestly feels easy for me to let go of that despair and to embrace a feeling of hope and even a feeling of joy,” she said.

UMB President **Bruce E. Jarrell, MD, FACS**, opened the annual event by reaffirming the University’s commitment to equity and diversity and encouraging audience members to continue King’s legacy.

“We do this not just during February, we should be doing it throughout the entire year,” he said. “And each of us should be committed to how can we continue the challenge that we have and how can we personally take this down to the individual level so that each of us aspires to these particular attributes that Reverend King championed.”

Goss Graves was introduced by **Diane Forbes Berthoud, PhD, MA**, chief equity, diversity, and inclusion officer and vice president, whose Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion sponsored the event.

“It is wonderful to continue this legacy of Dr. King and celebration of Black history, and it’s even more important in this time in our democracy,” she said. “Martin Luther King once said, ‘Make a career of humanity. Commit yourself to the noble struggle for equal rights. You will make a better person of yourself, a greater nation of your country, and a finer world to live in.’ At UMB, we make that commitment, that noble struggle for equal rights every day. Equity and justice are a core part of who we are.”

The event also honored the winners of the University's MLK Diversity Recognition Awards, which honor students, faculty, and staff at UMB whose personal or professional work sustains King's legacy of building a free and just society:

Outstanding Faculty Award: [Danya Qato, PhD, PharmD, MPH](#), associate professor, Department of Practice, Sciences, and Health Outcomes Research, School of Pharmacy

Outstanding Staff Award: [Rosemary Ferreira, MEd](#), associate director, UMB Intercultural Center

Outstanding Student Award: [Student National Dental Association chapter](#), School of Dentistry

In addition, the University recognized the winners of its new Community Champion of Equity and Justice Awards: [Edith Gilliard-Canty](#), a pillar of the Southwest Baltimore community and president of the Franklin Square Community Association, who was visibly moved when she went on stage to receive her award; and [Parity Homes](#), an equitable real estate development company that is transforming abandoned rowhouses in Baltimore into high-quality, affordable homes.

The event, which was held in MSTF Leadership Hall, also featured performances by Kevin Carr, MS, of Coppin State University, who sang the Black national anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," and spoken-word artist Black Chakra, who performed two of his works.

SHARE THIS ARTICLE

