MLK HOLIDAY; `STAY STANDING'; Speakers call for peace, progress and `love for all'; To achieve Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream, those who have succeeded must help those still struggling, an NAACP official said.

Rochelle Olson; Warren Wolfe; Staff Writers
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`Plight of the young elephants'

At an early-morning annual breakfast honoring King, NAACP board vice president Roslyn Brock ended her speech with the story of a herd of migrating African elephants, and how after the big elephants crossed a mighty river, they helped the young ones left behind get across.

"They didn't call a town meeting ... or organize a march to call attention to the plight of the young elephants," she said. Instead, they plunged back in, blocking the torrent so the young elephants could cross.

"Who are the big elephants that need to help the young ones?" she asked. "They're from Minnetonka, Eden Prairie and Edina. ... From northeast Minneapolis and Brooklyn Center. From Phillips, Folwell and Selby-Dale neighborhoods.

"Stay standing," she called out as the cheers and applause began to drown out her final words. "Stay standing to fight for your beloved country."

Before her speech, Brock noted that the "browning of America," with increased numbers of racial minorities and more racial intermarriage, "is changing the equation in business and politics. What is now the minority will become the majority in another 30 years or so.

"What's important is for us to realize that the discussion should not be about us as blacks or Hispanics or Asians or Caucasians," she said. "It's about us as Americans, as a people who will be a better, stronger people when we care about and look after each other."

At a table at the side of the huge auditorium, Mark Phillips sat with his two sons, ages 9 and 11. "It's important for them to see so many other people of color gathered to celebrate Dr. King's teachings.

"But it's also important to realize that, even when you're not grown-up, everybody can be a big elephant for somebody else - somebody in school, in your family, in your church," he said.

Recalling a lifetime of fighting for civil rights; Rep. John Lewis says the need to fight for civil rights is as strong as ever but the methods and passions of the `60s have changed .

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John Lewis' name is synonymous with the civil rights movement. He was an architect of and keynote speaker at the historic March on Washington in August 1963. He headed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) during the height of the movement. And he led the 1965 march in Selma, Ala., to demonstrate the need for voting rights. The marchers, violently attacked by Alabama state troopers, are credited with speeding up passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

A member of Congress from Georgia for two decades, the 65-year-old Lewis continues to work on issues affecting minority communities. He is the keynote speaker at a breakfast at the Minneapolis Convention Center this morning. Lewis spoke to the Star Tribune last week by telephone.

Q. What are some images from your civil rights work that are seared in your memory?

A. One is the freedom rides in May 1961 - arriving at the Greyhound bus station in Montgomery. There was a white student next to me from Beloit, Wisconsin As we came down the bus steps, an angry mob came and attacked. First they attacked anyone in the media. And then they started beating us. The two of us were beaten and left lying in a pool of blood. I thought I was going to die.

And Selma, March 1965. There were about 600 of us [planning to cross the bridge]. I thought we were going to be arrested that day. I had no idea we'd be beaten These troopers came at us with bullwhips, throwing tear gas Forty-one years later, I still don't know how I made it back across that bridge - a half a mile - and back to that church [where the march originated].

And when I spoke at the March on Washington, I was just 23 years old. When I was introduced by A. Phillip Randolph, he said, "I present to you the national chair of SNCC, young John Lewis."

I looked to my right, to my left, and straight ahead. I decided I must go forward. I was pretty fiery

Q. You, and many others, risked so much for civil rights gains. What do you consider the most significant threats to them today?

A. The courts could be a major threat to setting back the gains that have been made. In the past, we looked to the courts almost as sympathetic referees for the cause of civil rights. The same with Congress. But the makeup of the Supreme Court and the federal judiciary is becoming more and more conservative. And it would be hard today to get meaningful progressive social legislation through Congress. The issues of civil rights, race, class, hunger are not on their agenda.

Also, there's a lack of enforcement [of civil rights legislation]. We don't have people at the highest level of government, or even in the private sector, discussing race and bringing us together."

Q. During the 1960s, there were glaring symbols of segregation splashed across television screens at night. Is it harder to organize around issues that are more camouflaged these days?

A. Some people say we don't need symbols. But you had those signs [outside public facilities] - that said White Men, Colored Men - out in the open. Segregation was the order of the day. The symbols were important.

Q. Your website shows a time clock, clicking off the soaring national debt. What issues worry you today?

A. It's not right to leave this unbelievable debt to our children and grandchildren. We need to find a way to make health care available and accessible to all citizens. We have to tell elected officials we have to spend less on missiles and bombs, and more on education, health care, protecting the environment. And we must move from being concerned about civil rights to human rights.

There are attempts in some parts of America to dilute the power of minority voters. Here in Georgia, we had efforts to engage in a voter ID. It's a modern-day form of literacy test. We must make it as easy as possible for citizens to vote. And after they participate, you must make sure all the votes are counted.

Q. You don't hear much about nonviolent protests anymore.

A. When I was active in the 1960s, you could be arrested, jailed, beaten, get out of jail, get mended by some doctor or hospital and we'd go back again. We really did believe that if you adhered to the philosophy of nonviolence, somehow, some way, you would prevail.

There's a campaign in Fort Benning, Georgia, at the School of the Americas, which trains law enforcement in Central America. Over the years, you've had hundreds and thousands of people protesting at the school. Some spent months in federal prison.

Across the country, you have pockets of people who have a nonviolent philosophy, and live it. It may not make national news. But it's happening.

Q. Have you spent much time in Minnesota?

A. My first trip to Minnesota was in 1962, `63. There were students from the University of Minnesota who came South to support the movement. That developed strong ties between my organization, SNCC, and a student group at the university. Likewise in the spring of 1966, I spent a tremendous amount of time visiting college campuses around the state. The last time I was there [in Minnesota] was for the funeral of . [Congressman] Bruce Vento. He was a wonderful human being, one of a kind.

Q. How has the climate for social change shifted from the 1960s to today?

A. We didn't have a website. A fax machine. A cell phone. We believed in something. It was a sense of calling, that we were doing something much larger than we were.

I'm not sure there's still that sense of calling. It wasn't just civil rights. It was poverty, women's rights, farm workers' rights, Vietnam. We don't have that sense of passion. We need to find some way to inject that passion again.

Q. How does it feel to be a living legend?

A. We were ordinary people that allowed ourselves to be used for good. I feel very blessed. And I feel it is my obligation to pass it on, to tell the story.

Lewis will speak at 7:30 a.m. at the sold-out breakfast at the convention center, sponsored by the United Negro College Fund and the General Mills Foundation.