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Marion residents, oral history program to receive MLK Commission awards

COLUMBUS — Three Marion residents and one local organization will be recognized Thursday by the Ohio Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday Commission during its 36th annual Ohio Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Commemorative Celebration. They are among seven individuals and one organization being honored for their work to serve others and lift the oppressed in communities across Ohio. Typically held at Trinity Episcopal Church in downtown Columbus, this year's event was prerecorded and can be viewed at das.ohio.gov/mlk beginning Thursday at 11:45 a.m.

"As governor, I believe that we must keep the teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King of equality, unity, and justice at the forefront of everything we do," said Governor Mike DeWine "It is a privilege to recognize the outstanding service and achievements of Ohioans whose deeds and actions are consistent with Dr. King's teachings of non-violent social and economic change."

The 12-member [commission](#) advocates Dr. King's principles of nonviolent change and the pursuit of racial, social and economic justice, and annually presents the awards in January leading up to the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday.

"It is an honor to serve on this commission dedicated to keeping Dr. King's dream alive in Ohio," said McKinley Brown, chair of the commission. "After a year of such great social change and needed conversations about where we stand in advancing toward equity and understanding, I am especially pleased to recognize these Ohioans who are advocating for a better future."

Candace Floyd will receive the Educational Excellence Award, which recognizes those who have demonstrated a personal commitment to scholarship and have made progress in eradicating systemic barriers that impede the attainment of academic excellence.

Floyd is Media Specialist at Benjamin Harrison Elementary School in the Marion City School District, where she has introduced cultural programming and resources to the district's elementary students.

A Marion native who attended Marion City Schools, Floyd is making a difference for students of color in her community by introducing new texts, resources, and programs on the history of the Civil Rights Movement, the racial justice struggle in the United States, cultural traditions, and more. Her work expands educational and cultural understanding opportunities for students who often rarely get to learn about their community's own history, cultural arts, and resilience in school.

In her time with the district, she has enhanced Black History Month programming, lessons on Civil Rights history, and "an urgent vision for library arts as a place where students can find and nurture their own cultural roots, and listen deeply across lines of difference," said her nominator.

Her nominator praised Floyd's "commitment to racial justice work through the fight for equitable education and the providing culturally-sustaining education for students from all races and cultural backgrounds" and said she has turned the library program into "a culturally-affirming site for all students — holding space for students to not just cultivate lifelong love of reading, but to cultivate diverse cultural literacies, too."

Beyond her work at the district, Floyd is active in programming at her church, Mayes Community Temple, and in her community. She was an organizer of the Rally 4 Justice demonstration for racial justice in Marion County this summer and participated in the Marion Voices Folklife and Oral History Programs' Fall 2020 Community Co-Curation Cycle. She was co-host of the 2020 "This Christmas: Black Marion Celebrates" two-hour cultural livestream event, celebrating and amplifying the power of Black holiday traditions across Marion County.

Whitney Gherman will receive the Health Equity and Awareness Award, which recognizes exemplary community outreach and educational programs that serve an underserved population in the state.

An educator for the Marion County Office of The Ohio State University Extension, social worker Gherman works in the Marion community to initiate meaningful dialogue about racial issues, food access, and affordable housing.

Gherman's nominator noted that she has gone above and beyond to mobilize the resources of her role as a Marion County Extension Educator to "build innovative programming, workshops, and services to not only address, but transform, structural determinants of health in Marion County."

She also has become a collaborator of dozens of racial justice organizations across Marion County, helping to bring racism to the forefront as a public health issue, and working to build community-led programming on food insecurity, racial and housing justice, and facilitating land-based projects with Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color.

Some of her community projects include supporting a community garden at Mayes Community Temple, facilitating land transfer efforts, and hosting anti-racism workshops as well as leading research to address food access, healthy eating, and physical activity.

Gherman's work "is deeply aligned with Dr. King's commitment to rooting structural inequality through a visionary imagination of new social services and programs tackling issues like wealth, housing, and poverty," added her nominator.

Johnnie Jackson will receive the Community Building Award, which recognizes individuals or organizations who have made significant contributions toward building a sense of unity among Ohio citizens.

Jackson is the Diversity and Equity Supervisor for Marion City Schools and in less than a year in that position has introduced countless new programs to build racial justice in Marion City Schools. Programs include the Harambee Black Boys group and social justice reading clubs for teachers and community members. The district also passed a resolution in June affirming its "intent to be a leader in overcoming racial injustice and other forms of discrimination."

Jackson "believes fervently in the power of young people, supporting them while also leading the way in the fight not just for racial justice and equity, but in more free futures for all," said his nominator.

Since 2017, Jackson also has served as the community coordinator for the Marion Voices Folklife and Oral History Project that is sponsored by the Marion County Historical Society, and is receiving the Commission's Cultural Awareness Award. Working with Jackson and other community leaders, the

historical society will launch a community co-curated permanent exhibit showcasing the story of Black life, cultural arts, history, and futures in Marion County.

Along with fellow 2021 MLK Award winner Whitney Gherman of the OSU Extension Services of Marion County, Jackson also launched the Community Voices community leadership training program to train a new cohort of racial justice leaders on Marion's west side.

Jackson's nominator noted "his remarkable ability to see the opportunity for new coalitions and projects to address needs in Marion County with an eye to our county's incredible assets."

"Like Dr. King, Johnnie Jackson is a tireless and fierce organizer for social, racial, and economic justice in Marion County."

The *Marion Voices* Folklife and Oral History Program will receive the Cultural Awareness Award, which recognizes an appreciation for diversity and skill in building and maintaining harmonious cross-cultural relationships.

Marion Voices – Marion County's folk-and-cultural-arts-for-social-justice program – seeks to capture stories from the recent past and document folk, traditional, and culturally based heritage arts practices from underserved communities in Marion County. Founded in 2017 as a transformative community outreach and racial justice program of the Marion County Historical Society, the program works with local partners to gather stories and document expressive cultural practices that exemplify traditions of historically marginalized communities in the area from the 1960s to now.

"*Marion Voices*' vision is to mobilize the power that cultural art forms and traditional artists and memory keepers inherently possess to hold space for critical community conversations," said the project's nominator, calling it an exemplar of deeply community-collaborative programming focused on Black history, cultural arts, and experiences.

Project founders have focused on building solidarity and trust within the community by pulling representatives from almost a dozen racial and social justice organizations to collaborate on the community co-curation of working-class and Black history and culture in Marion County. Since 2017, with support from state and local partners, *Marion Voices* has taken a year-long pilot folklife survey of the county and translated that work into the *Marion Voices* "Culture Keepers" roster. This roster is an online directory of more than 35 area cultural artists.

Marion Voices also is hosting three community co-curation cycles to amplify Black history and cultural arts throughout Marion County. *Marion Voices* also has sponsored and co-produced a series of cultural arts events, including Marion County's 2020 Juneteenth celebration livestream featuring live performances and discussions with Marion County Black cultural artists.

The program "exemplifies Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s vision of collaborative cultural organizing for justice comprising members of different cultural, ethnic, and geographic communities," added the project's nominator. "Across its program activities, *Marion Voices* represents a bold new direction in community-collaborative cultural organizing."

The Ohio Department of Administrative Services provides administrative support to the Ohio Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday Commission.

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