Cultural Awareness Award

Award criteria: The recipient selected in this category has demonstrated an appreciation for diversity and evidenced skill in building and maintaining harmonious cross-cultural relationships. The recipient’s achievements foster Dr. King’s vision of unity among people of diverse cultural backgrounds.

Marion Voices Folklife & Oral History Program
Marion

The Marion Voices Folklife & Oral History Program – 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 the Ohio Arts Council, Marion Community Foundation, Ohio History Fund, Ohio Humanities, United Way of North-Central Ohio, and Rotary Club of Marion, 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.

Marion Voices has pioneered a model it calls “equity budgeting,” which insists that economic justice must be at the heart of racial justice cultural organizing. Under this model, all participating community members, collaborating artists, and cultural workers are paid a living wage.

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.”