

## **Kingsport MLK parade to mark season of change**

**Kevin Castle • Jan 17, 2009 at 12:00 AM**

"It took 11 years, but it has made a difference."

That's the assessment of Pastor Ronnie Collins of years of frigid walks down Kingsport streets and decades of dreaming of a day like Jan. 19.

"It's a day that I wish many African Americans could have gotten to see, and one that I hope all will cherish," he said.

It's a day that will mark the eve of the nation's first African-American president and the date that honors Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. with events nationwide including the annual MLK Holiday March in downtown Kingsport.

The parade is scheduled to begin at noon Monday at the intersection of East Sevier Avenue and Center Street and end on Shelby Street at the Kingsport city parking lot between City Hall and the Justice Center.

The day also marks a first for the parade, as a street within the city limits has King's name.

"It started with the marches from Riverview to downtown — and this was by no means a quick road to what the community wanted — but it finally came together last year," said Collins of the street-naming project that came to fruition last year when Kingsport officials voted for the change.

Pastor Matthew Thomas has been involved in the parade for the past five years and is happy to see the landscape change so dramatically for this year's festivities.

"Going into this year, we have so much to be thankful for. Dr. King has been such an inspiration for so many, and to see an African-American president being ready to be sworn in and to have a national holiday to honor Dr. King, it is truly an honor to be witness to these things," said Thomas.

The parade led to community improvement initiatives. Corporate sponsors such as Eastman Chemical Co., Food City and Office Depot are connected to the event through outreach programs that help give families in Northeast Tennessee and Southwest Virginia everything from baby diapers to schools supplies to meals.

"It has binded us together in so many ways," said Collins. "Many of the outreach initiatives we do reach people of all colors and creeds, so it goes to show people that change can only take place if you do things the right way."

Those interested in taking part in the annual parade Monday can contact the Tennessee and Virginia Fellowship Against Racism at 956-0675 or by e-mail at [elderronwcollins@aol.com](mailto:elderronwcollins@aol.com).

Following the parade, Brothers of Clinch Mountain Lodge No. 531 and Daughters of Dunbar Temple No. 344, 1018 Martin Luther King Jr. St., will hold a free lunch at the lodge. Homemade chili beans and potato soup, cornbread, crackers and beverages will be served. There will be hot dogs for children. The public is invited.

**Kingsport Times News:**

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