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LOCAL

'Raised to serve.' MLK Day award goes to Hyannis resident



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HYANNIS — Jeanne Morrison, 66, was in between conference calls at her home on Thursday when she stopped to share stories about her childhood on Old Yarmouth Road and Rosary Lane in the 1960s and 1970s.

Most of the neighborhood was filled with Black people at that time, said Morrison. The families were tight knit, she said.

As a child and young adult, Morrison could often be found helping elders with whatever they needed — or sticking up for younger children who were being bullied, she said. Morrison was also concerned for people with disabilities.

Back then, Morrison didn't know what activism was. But she said she understood how to do the right thing.

"People in our neighborhood didn't have means. My mother would bake something. I'd put it in a wagon and bring it to someone's house. I was raised to serve," said Morrison. "I think I had a sense of reverence."

The values she cultivated as a young person have followed Morrison through her lifetime and she currently serves on the League of Women Voters of the Cape Cod Area, Barnstable County Human Rights Advisory Commission, Amplify POC Cape Cod, and the Massachusetts Women of Color Coalition. Morrison is also a founding member of the Martin Luther King Jr. Action Team Conversations with Police Task Force.

Morrison's commitment to human rights and social justice has helped guide the Cape through hard moments and change, said Action Team member Wesley Williams. Morrison's brilliance, Williams said, has been able to "bring institutions and people together."

Which is why Morrison will receive the Action Team's Racial Justice Award during the group's Annual Martin Luther King Day Breakfast, on Monday, Jan. 20, at the Church of the Holy Spirit in Orleans.

"Jeanne is forthright about inequities. She commands respect in that regard. People know that she is for them," said Williams.

The Rev. Pancheta Peterson was the Action Team's first Racial Justice Award recipient, in 2024.

Never give up: Martin and Jeanne

Morrison said her parents, George and Mary Morrison, gave her a foundation of humanitarianism.

"They always said that every person should receive dignity, worth and value," Morrison said.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was also an inspiration at an early age. She often circled back to a quote from his "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech — the last address King gave before he was fatally shot at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee on April 4, 1968.

"Martin said 'We've got to give ourselves to this struggle until the end.' That's powerful," said Morrison. King, she said, stood up for many souls during a time where his own life was in jeopardy.

"I know he was closer to God despite receiving the death threats. He knew his time was near," said Morrison. "But he showed me that giving love, giving dignity, giving opportunity is an everyday effort no matter what's happening."

Morrison's activism also guided her career

The bulk of Morrison's career was spent in human services as the director of diversity at the May Institute, and then as the assistant general manager for diversity and civil rights for the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority. Her goal, she said, was to close the gap between management and multicultural staff members and those with severe disabilities.

"It's only race and justice for the things that people want, need and deserve to have," she said. "The color of someone's skin shouldn't dictate what opportunity a person can have."

For Action Team member Karen Boujoukos, Morrison's career path strengthened her ability to be clearheaded during difficult conversations about race. Boujoukos recalled a film screening of "Best Enemies," based on the friendship that developed between a Black woman and a Klu Klux Klan leader. Morrison led the discussion following the screening.

"Jeanne was so open to hearing what people had to say — even when the conversation became emotional. I have found her to be a tremendous teacher and advocate," said Boujoukos.

A guiding light for police task force

Morrison also facilitates bystander training, said Boujoukos, and works with police chiefs on the Lower Cape to bridge gaps between law enforcement and community members.

"She tells it like it is. She doesn't judge people. She meets them where they are," she said. "She has a gift for that."

Williams, who also serves on the Conversations with Police Task Force, said Task Force meetings have had moments of adversity, but Morrison is a source of understanding. Because Morrison's brother Brian Morrison is a police officer, said Williams, she understands the pressures police face on the job. But Morrison also brings her experiences as a Black woman to the table.

"Many police officers on the Cape have little experience policing communities of color. They haven't lived around us. They didn't go to school around us, and their only contact is through criminal incident," said Williams. "Jeanne has helped establish a level of trust."

Morrison obvious choice for award, says Williams

And it's that practice, said Williams, that makes Morrison the obvious choice for the Racial Justice Award.

"Nobody has Jeanne's breadth of knowledge. Nobody has done more. She gives all of herself even through her own physical challenges," said Williams.

For Morrison, it's imperative for Americans to acknowledge that the United States was built on racism.

"The dividing factor has always been race," said Morrison. "But if we can all come together and listen to each other we can move the needle. I'll fight for everyone until the end of my days. Until I can't serve anymore."

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