

# Lawndales unite and say 'no' to violence

By Tiffany Childress

North Lawndale! South Lawndale! One Lawndale! Black Lawndale! Brown Lawndale! One Lawndale!"

That was the chant that rang through the Little Village and North Lawndale communities on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, January 15, as about 500 residents and supporters came out on a cold and snowy morning to honor the King legacy and to show their commitment to racial respect, cooperation and solidarity in the greater Lawndale community.



"North Lawndale! South Lawndale! One Lawndale!" shouted about 500 residents and supporters in Little Village and North Lawndale at the Martin Luther King Day march on January 15.

Photo: Mayra Nava

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Organized after recent violence between Latino and African-American youth near Little Village Lawndale High School (LVLHS), the march and rally focused on bringing together the two Lawndale neighborhoods.

Lawndale is made up of two communities, markedly different to any observer, but similar in many ways. "There's so much that both of these communities have in common," said Marcus Thorne, interim executive director of the Lawndale Christian Development Corporation.

"It doesn't make sense that we don't work more together. We all need affordable housing, jobs," he said. "There are things that we can learn from each other—strong cultural values in each group."

Lisa Pugh, a North Lawndale resident and mother of a student at the high school, concurred. "We all have the same issues – not having enough money and getting our lights turned off. We all bleed red, eat the same food – it's prepared different, but it's the same. Even our children are dating one another, dancing together. They're together; they're united. It's not the children [who remain separated], it's the parents. King started the dream; it's up to us to keep the dream alive."

Parents of Little Village Lawndale High School students organized the MLK day activities with the support of high school faculty, Little Village Community Development Corporation and Lawndale Christian Development Corporation.

### **School bridges two communities**

LVLHS is a Chicago Public School campus that houses four small schools, serving approximately 800 freshman and sophomore students from the greater Lawndale area.

North Lawndale is predominately African-American and is known for its history of political activism; King temporarily lived in the community during his anti-slum housing campaign in 1966. South Lawndale, or Little Village, is a predominantly Mexican and Mexican-American community that boasts a thriving commercial district. The campus' student body is approximately 70 percent Latino and 30 percent African-American.



Organized after recent violence between Latino and African-American youth near Little Village Lawndale High School, the march started at the school and moved on to main thoroughfares like Pulaski and Ogden.

Photo: Mayra Nava

The 400 people who poured into the campus auditorium for the rally saw strong student and youth leadership. Students Alejandra Amezcua and Roshan Kinsey emceed the hour-long program of exhortations and affirmations, which alternated with colorful and energetic dances, percussion performances, poetry and song.

The diverse audience gave its undistracted attention, drawn in by brilliant reds, purples, blues and yellows in the costumes of the Mexican Jalisco dancers, and short and sincere speeches from community residents, principals and the former hunger strikers who fasted for 19 days in 2001 to show Chicago Public Schools that the Little Village community was serious about getting a new high school.

### **Common goals and struggles**

The rally was followed by a "Solidarity March" through both communities to create unity around common goals and struggles, and to pro-actively respond to negative and divisive forces.



"This is a visual, concrete demonstration on a significant level, showing struggle and solidarity," said Rudy Lozano, an active Little Village resident. "The most important thing now is the follow up."

Photo: Mayra Nava

As the group marched from the high school campus to the busy main streets, Pulaski and Ogden Avenues, students proudly held up signs that challenged: "Stop Violence," "End Racism," and "United We March." Dozens of drivers beeped their horns, and sometimes raised fists of agreement, as they drove past.

The flashing blue lights of escorting police cars, bullhorns, and chants only added to the energy of the two-mile march. For Noelle Jones and Martha Irizarry, LVLHS faculty, the rally and march were a demonstration behind lots of words about unity.

"We haven't shown support to our African-American community," Irizarry said. "We've talked about it but don't show it. This is visible support." Jones agreed. "We are finally showing instead of just talking about support.

This is especially important for the School of Social Justice."

Students from North Lawndale College Preparatory High School (NLCPHS) also came out. Desiree Sawyer, a freshman at NLCPHS, said, "So many people say Mexicans shouldn't be here [in the U.S. ], but they are people just like us." Her words were echoed by an affirming chant: "Africanos y mexicanos, luchando mano y mano!" ("African-Americans and Mexicans struggling hand in hand!")

The crowd had swelled to 500 by the time the march culminated at Lawndale Community Church for speeches and the breaking of Mexican and African-American "bread." Prexy Nesbitt, an activist who marched with King in the 1960s, said that the 2007 march had made history: Never before had he seen a group as this one gather in a Westside church to show support of King's dreams and challenges.

Indeed there was great excitement and much to celebrate, but one North Lawndale youth soberly questioned and challenged: "Was this all a publicity stunt? A march don't really change nothing. People may all march together, but they can go back to doing the same things."

Others also recognized the limitations of a march and emphasized the need to follow the public demonstration with other efforts. "The majority of the people who are here are young," said Rudy Lozano, an active Little Village resident. "This is a visual, concrete demonstration on a significant level, showing struggle and solidarity. The most important thing now is the follow up."