

A Living Message: MLK's Legacy Through Youth Poetry and Essays

Why it matters: Young writers are sharing their creativity and insights on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s message in Santa Barbara. Here's what I witnessed, reporting from the event.



BIRTH OF REASON

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The 2026 Essay and Poetry Awards Program for Santa Barbara County youth winners have been announced, and I was in the audience as a select few performed their entries. It was eye-opening and deeply fulfilling to hear young people speak with such determination and power. This contest is a core part of the annual MLKSB celebration, which has long partnered with community, faith, and nonprofit

organizations across Santa Barbara County to create shared spaces for reflection, art, and dialogue. As part of that tradition, this year's read-aloud performances by select finalists were hosted during a community worship service, bringing youth voices into a broader civic and communal setting.

For nearly two decades, the program has been a staple of the community. This year's theme was leadership driven by justice and humanity and it wasn't abstract. It came through clearly, personally, and with care in the students' words.

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Birth of Reason founder and artist Judi Weisbart couldn't attend, so I was grateful to step in. I had never been to a Jewish service before and was genuinely excited to experience something new. I was welcomed immediately, helped to my seat, and drawn into a space filled with community, reverence, and joy, along with lively, collective singing.

The rabbi leading the service wasn't who I ended up interviewing, but he embodied the warmth of the space. When a phone rang, he smiled and said, "Whoever's phone is ringing, pick it up—it might be Moses." It caught me completely off guard and made me laugh in a way I didn't expect. My only real frame of reference for faith services was Catholic ones from early childhood, which I remember as formal and tightly structured. The ease behind this moment felt open, human, and alive.

Throughout the service, select winners stepped up to the microphone and were met with enthusiastic support. It's soul-enriching to witness young people claim their voices. Each student brought Dr. King's words

into their own lives, looking at this year's theme through their own questions, hopes, and perspectives.

Felicity, a sixth grader, spoke about responsibility through everyday kindness and helpfulness, delivering her piece with calm confidence. Stella, a seventh grader, used sharp alliteration and repetition, showing careful thought and emotional clarity.

One student stood out for the way she held the room. Arrow, an essay award finalist, spoke with a steady, grounded voice. Her delivery drew a clear response from the audience, culminating in a standing ovation. She moved through her essay without hesitation, speaking with intention and focus.

Afterward, Arrow took time to speak with me after being congratulated by members of the congregation, faith leaders, and representatives from the MLK Committee of Santa Barbara. Reflecting on the experience, she said, "I'm super glad it went well. I'm proud of what I did. I'm grateful for all the praise." She smiled and added, "I thought everyone was so nice." Arrow is a sixth grader from Solvang.

When I asked what inspired her writing, she said, "When I heard Martin Luther King quotes about our leaders, it really spoke to me. I started thinking about what kind of leaders we need in our country and our world."

She shared that the piece came together over two nights, followed by editing and repeated practice to memorize it. During her reading, she did not use notes or look down once, maintaining steady eye contact with the audience throughout.

I asked Arrow if she had ever considered running for political office one day. She smiled and said it's not something she's ruled out, answering thoughtfully and without hesitation. Listening to her, it was clear that

many paths remain open to her. And honestly, that same feeling stayed with me for every student I had the pleasure of hearing speak that day.

Following the service, I sat down with Rabbi Maddi to ask her more about the collaboration that brought youth voices into this space. I'm saving that heartfelt conversation for a future article ~ so stay tuned.

This event, and the full weekend of programming, is not just a commemoration, but a living call to civic engagement and social justice. The youth essay and poetry awards are one powerful part of a broader effort to honor MLK and bring his message and method into the present moment.

At a time when division and intimidation are too often normalized, these students remind us of something essential: empathy is an active choice. Our young community members are the leaders already forming among us, and they're showing what it looks like to speak with care, clarity, and empathy. Their voices matter. They connect us back to one another.

"We need leaders, not in love with money but in love with justice. Not in love with publicity, but in love with humanity."

— Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. *The Birth of a New Age*, Buffalo, NY, 1958

"By following Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I have found ways to perform acts of service to help my community and be a leader."

— Felicity, *How Leaders Should Act*, MLKSB Essay entry, 2026

"Take the love you feel and show it
Until the entire world knows it."

— Patricia, *Lead with Love*, MLKSB Poetry entry, 2026

"Dear Dr. King,
It's me, a dreamer that woke up in your tomorrow...
not as an echo,

but as a heartbeat.”

— Stella, *Letter to Dr. King from the Future*, MLKSB Essa entry, 2026

We congratulate all essay and poetry finalists and thank every applicant, along with the families and community members who supported them.

If you couldn't attend this year, or would like to donate or volunteer, please visit the Santa Barbara MLK Committee's website at <https://mlksb.org>.

Thank you to the MLK Committee of Santa Barbara for years of steady commitment to justice and community.

And thank you, reader, for spending this time with *Birth of Reason*. We hope you enjoy our corner of the world, where art, humanity, and connection continue to meet.



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