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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Winners of 42nd Annual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Contests Announced, Will Be Celebrated at Free Citywide Celebration

*Free event on Monday, January 19, to honor student contest winners
and community leader Andre Lee Ellis*

MILWAUKEE (January 12, 2026) – The [Marcus Performing Arts Center](#) (MPAC), along with We Energies, Milwaukee Public Schools, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, and Milwaukee Teachers’ Education Association, announced today the student winners of the 42nd Annual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. art, speech, and writing contests. The winners will be celebrated at the [42nd Annual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Birthday Celebration](#), presented by Bader Philanthropies, on Monday, January 19, at the Marcus Performing Arts Center.

This free event, coordinated by the MLK Steering Committee, will begin at 4:00 p.m. in Wilson Theater at Vogel Hall and highlight this year’s youth contest winners as well as feature remarks from elected officials and performances from I Bei Bambini, the Messmer High School Gospel Choir, Banat Al-Huriyah, and Paj Hnub Hli dance group from the Hmong American Friendship Association. Immediately following the program, all are invited to the Paulette Y. Copeland Reception celebrating the winners in the Bradley Pavilion.

The event will also include a special presentation of the **Rev. Joseph Ellwanger Social Justice Award to Andre Lee Ellis**, a longtime community leader, artist, and youth advocate whose decades of service have strengthened Milwaukee through urban agriculture, cultural leadership, and community engagement. From empowering young people through agricultural education to building connections through the arts and neighborhood celebrations, Ellis’s work reflects a deep and enduring commitment to social justice.

This year’s theme, “True Peace,” was inspired by an article Dr. King submitted in November 1956 to *Christian Century*, a weekly religious magazine. It was published on February 6, 1957 in an issue dedicated to race relations. He wrote:

“True peace is not merely the absence of some negative force—tension, confusion or war; it is the presence of some positive force—justice, good will and brotherhood.”

“We are honored to continue hosting this long-standing tradition that brings our community together to celebrate Dr. King’s legacy and elevate the voices and talents of Milwaukee’s youth,” stated **MPAC President & CEO Kevin Giglinto**. “This celebration underscores our commitment to fostering equity, inclusion, and opportunity for the next generation through the arts.”

Since 1984, Milwaukee has proudly stood alongside Atlanta as one of the only cities in the country to host an annual celebration in honor of Dr. King’s birthday. For over four decades, young people have been the heart of this celebration, interpreting Dr. King’s timeless messages through art, speech, and writing contests.

This year’s entries were submitted by students from Milwaukee and surrounding school districts. The complete list of this year’s contest winners can be found below.

Additionally, the **Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Educator of the Year Award** will be presented to **Natalie Hilgers, Middle School English Teacher at Salam School** for her outstanding commitment to student growth and service in her community.

“This year’s theme, ‘True Peace,’ reminds us that peace is something we actively build through understanding and care for one another,” said **Bridgett Gonzalez, Grants Director at Bader Philanthropies**. “Bader Philanthropies is proud to support this celebration, which uplifts Milwaukee’s young people and uses the arts as a powerful platform for students to express their voice and explore Dr. King’s legacy.”

This event is free and open to the public. There are no tickets required to attend, and complimentary parking will be available in the MPAC Parking Structure.

Event sponsors include Bader Philanthropies (Presenting Sponsor); We Energies and Milwaukee Public Schools (Speech Contest Sponsors); Milwaukee Teachers’ Education Association and the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel (Writing Contest Sponsors), and Marcus Performing Arts Center (Art Contest Sponsor); Educators Credit Union, Islamic Society of Milwaukee, and The Truth 101.7FM (Freedom Sponsors); Chorus Community Health Plan and Milwaukee County Transit System (Peace Sponsors); Landmark Credit Union, Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee Brewers, and Milwaukee County Zoo (Dream Sponsors); Donelle Johnson and the Copeland Family (Paulette Y. Copeland Reception Sponsor); with additional support provided by Forest County Potawatomi Foundation, the Greater Milwaukee Foundation, and the Herzfeld Foundation.

For curriculum resources and more information, visit www.MarcusCenter.org/MLK

Art Contest Winners

Grades K-2

- 1st Place Emily Paez Nunez – Saint Lucas Lutheran School
- 2nd Place Leylani Ugalde – Longfellow School
- 3rd Place Amir Folad – Lowell International Elementary School

Grades 3-5

- 1st Place Jose Garcia – Samuel Clemens School
- 2nd Place Kenia Martinez Vargas – La Escuela Fratney
- 3rd Place Yaretzi Santos Sixteco – Longfellow School

Grades 6-8

- 1st Place Chricyris Gil Midence – Wedgewood Park International School
- 2nd Place Kimberly Hurtado Garcia – Wedgewood Park International School
- 3rd Place Cristell Linaldi Vela – Wedgewood Park International School

Grades 9-12

- 1st Place Glorianna Danowski – St. Thomas More High School
- 2nd Place Haley Nagel – St. Thomas More High School
- 3rd Place Lilly Evrard – St. Thomas More High School

Speech Contest Winners

Grades K-2

- 1st Place Josie Evans – Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. School
- 2nd Place Layla Walker – Eastbrook Academy
- 3rd Place Montel Taylor – Samuel Clemens School

Grades 3-4

- 1st Place Aalaila Simmons – Lowell International Elementary School
- 2nd Place Leanna Mitchell – Samuel Clemens School
- 3rd Place Mackenzie Peterson – Golda Meir School

Grades 5-6

- 1st Place Stevie Smith – Eastbrook Academy
- 2nd Place Demar Strong – Samuel Clemens School
- 3rd Place Aiden Rios-Calaff – Doerfler School

Grades 7-8

- 1st Place Titania McHenry – Fernwood Montessori School
- 2nd Place Ruth Omoruyi – Eastbrook Academy
- 3rd Place Renad Kabashi – Golda Meir School

Grades 9-10

- 1st Place Dahlia Santiago – Golda Meir School
- 2nd Place Nina Thao – Riverside University High School
- 3rd Place Prince Mensah-Brown – Eastbrook Academy

Grades 11-12

- 1st Place Ayden Thrash – Golda Meir School
- 2nd Place Leah Serdynski – Wisconsin Connections Academy
- 3rd Place Amani Abu – Eastbrook Academy

Writing Contest Winners

Grades K-1 Samuel Clemens School; Myia Dowl and Aruna Halala-Vishudh (Teachers)
Students: Devyn Bady, Amora Baines-Nugen, Jahani Bernal, Jennifer Cameron, Thailan Clark,
Raelynn Henning, Mallery Hobbs-Robinson, Alayah Hurst, Jermill Jordan, Kay'Loni Martin,
Lanyea Mccaa, Giovanni Ortiz, A'Riyah Robinson, Perrionna Stewart, Talaia Taylor,
Kamayah Trotter-Bell, Miya Watson

Grades 2-3

- 1st Place Haileyana Molin – I.D.E.A.L. School
- 2nd Place Audrey Robinson – Golda Meir School
- 3rd Place Amelia Par – Lowell International Elementary School

Grades 4-5

- 1st Place Mariana Mitchell – Samuel Clemens School
- 2nd Place Kamrie Brown – Samuel Clemens School

3rd Place Arvell Sewell – Samuel Clemens School

Grade 6

1st Place Alyssa Rockett – Milwaukee Parkside School for the Arts

2nd Place Khaydin Allen – Golda Meir School

3rd Place Lailaa Jefferson – GreenTree Preparatory Academy

Grades 7-8

1st Place Ruth Omoruyi – Eastbrook Academy

2nd Place Reham Hamed – Salam School

3rd Place Elliot Anderson – A.E. Burdick School

Grades 9-10

1st Place Sabir Eisa – Salam School

2nd Place Kamarion Jackson – Riverside University High School

3rd Place Reem Mayo – Salam School

Grades 11-12

1st Place Bonnie Wise – Golda Meir School

2nd Place Carla Jones – Riverside University High School

3rd Place Aarielle Redmond-McClennon – Riverside University High School

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About Marcus Performing Arts Center

A mission-based non-profit organization located in downtown Milwaukee, the Marcus Performing Arts Center (MPAC) brings high-quality arts and cultural programming to Southeastern Wisconsin. MPAC strives to act as an energizing force that connects the community to the world through collaboration, innovation, social engagement, and the transformative power of the performing arts. Through multiple performance series, community events, and educational experiences, MPAC brings a diverse range of celebrated artists to the region. A fixture in Milwaukee for over 55 years, MPAC is proud to be part of the Milwaukee Theater District as well as a dedicated War Memorial facility. Learn more at www.MarcusCenter.org.