

EAST BAY TIMES

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El Cerrito holds its 30th annual MLK Day celebration

Thousands turnout throughout the East Bay to honor civil rights leader with events in Oakland, elsewhere



Janean Mitchell, of El Cerrito, waves to passing cars as she participates in a parade during the Martin Luther King Jr. 30th annual celebration in El Cerrito, Calif. on Monday, Jan. 21, 2019. (Jose Carlos Fajardo/Bay Area News Group)

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EL CERRITO — Yoko Olsgaard’s reason for taking part in Martin Luther King Jr. Day was as basic as the T-shirt she wore — which read “Never Again” and listed the names of the internment camps that detained 120,000 Japanese-Americans during World War II.

“We’re trying to say, ‘No more, not again,’ ” said Olsgaard, a member of the Japanese American Citizens League Contra Costa chapter. Olsgaard is the granddaughter of an internee.

Yoko Olsgaard, of Oakland, is wearing a T-shirt saying “Never Again,” in reference to the mass internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. She and other members of the Contra Costa chapter of the Japanese American

Citizens League have been taking part in El Cerrito's MLK Day celebration from the very beginning 30 years ago. (Jon Kawamoto/Bay Area News Group)
She was flanked by about 10 chapter members carrying a banner. The group gathered early Monday morning at El Cerrito City Hall to take part in El Cerrito's 30th anniversary Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration, the longest-running MLK event in the East Bay. The march began along San Pablo Avenue to El Cerrito High School via Cerrito Vista Park.

"We're part of the same mission — we want equality, we want an end to discrimination," said Olsgaard, who added that she and the Japanese American Citizens League Contra Costa chapter have been taking part in the El Cerrito celebration since the very beginning.

"I'm happy and I'm hopeful that everyone here is like me — happy and hopeful — that we're marching for a good reason and a good purpose," said emcee Willola Ross of the Zion Hill Missionary Baptist Church in Richmond, in her opening remarks to the El Cerrito crowd. It was a festive, diverse and lively group of African-Americans, whites, Asian Americans and Latinos, spanning generations from small children to seniors.

Supervisor John Gioia called the El Cerrito celebration "the biggest and best" in Contra Costa County.

"I think it's really important to be out here and to be part of things today because so often what we're hearing is that we can't be silent, we can't stand by," Gioia said.

The theme of the 30th celebration was "Moving the Wisdom of Our Past Forward Towards Justice." The event actually began Sunday with a free documentary screening of "Cracking the Codes," an approach to understanding racial inequity, and a community conversation.

Uche Uwahemu, of Richmond, walks with his children Lemuel, 7, and Isaiah, 5, while participating in a parade during the Martin Luther King Jr. 30th annual celebration in El Cerrito, Calif. on Monday, Jan. 21, 2019. Uwahemu is a representative of Assembly woman Buffy Wicks of District 15. (Jose Carlos Fajardo/Bay Area News Group)

The El Cerrito event was sponsored by the city of El Cerrito, St. Peter Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, the El Cerrito branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the West Contra Costa Unified School District.

Scenes like the one in El Cerrito were repeated, both large and small, throughout the East Bay in honor of King, the civil rights icon who was only 39 when he was killed by an assassin's bullet in April 1968.

MLK events included celebrations, marches, concerts, an oratorical festival and poetry slam, and a film festival in Piedmont, Hayward, Oakland and San Leandro and other cities. In addition, more than 20 community cleaning and beautification projects were held in Oakland as a day of service and more than 2,000 volunteers were expected.

At one of the projects, the Jingtowntown Native Plant Garden and Murals, about a dozen people gathered early Monday morning to create a street mural, funded in part by the city of Oakland, and clean 2,000 square feet of murals and mosaics on a wall in the Jingtowntown warehouse district. Friends of Sausal Creek weeded and cleaned the native plant garden that runs along the length of the murals and mosaics.

"I feel that it's important now more than ever to have the community aware of what you can do in your little part of the world to make everyone's life better and smoother and a little bit easier," said Jill McLennan, a teacher and community activist, who with Cynthia Elliott, designed the garden and murals that both beautify the neighborhood and support creek restoration.

The Jingtowntown Native Plant Garden and Murals began in 2009, with McLennan directing 16 artists to create the murals and mosaics. Since that time, Elliott has been organizing neighborhood workdays for weeding and planting the native garden.