

OJAI VALLEY NEWS

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January 18, 2010 - Performing artist Gill Sotu, right, belts out some rhymes accompanied by his guitar man, Daniel Flores, in Libbey Park during the Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration hosted by Ojai Valley Youth Foundation on Monday. Photo by Logan Hall.

By Logan Hall

Hundreds of people from Ojai's community gathered on a warm Monday to celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. Day in Libbey Park, and empty seats started to fill as performer Gill Sotu took the stage. "I'm going to have all of you up and moving by the time I'm done up here," said Sotu to the crowd before launching into his first song.

Some people were dancing, and some were whistling and clapping. Kids were cooling off in the Libbey fountain while others were busy drawing patterns and pictures on the concrete walkway with colorful pieces of chalk.

Hosted by the Ojai Valley Youth Foundation, the event gave the community a chance to remember and celebrate the life of a man who was so integral in shaping the society of today. Many local artists were on hand to entertain the masses including singer Julie Christensen, the Nordhoff High School brass quintet and performances from schools like Oak Grove and Besant Hill.

"We really try to put something on that celebrates all of the creative outlets," said Meg Wall, Youth Foundation program director. "It's such a powerful event. We're here to celebrate someone who changed the way we view people." Local artist Kate Hoffman painted a depiction of King that was up for bid in a silent auction. The starting bid was \$1,000 although at the end of the day, no one had bid on the painting, but many stopped to enjoy the vivid colors and historical representation on the canvas. "Someone really took their time painting that," said local Marty Mellein, pointing at the canvas. Also featured during the event were different art pieces by kids from local schools that were hung in a row above the sidewalk in front of the park. The art was the students' interpretation of the event's theme, "Unity Starts with Understanding." The Youth Foundation also had local schools submit poetry following the same theme. Four were chosen by the foundation's MLK day committee to have their poems read to the crowd.

Wall says that the planning and organizing of the event was mostly in the hands of the teens involved with OVYF, and that many other young people from the valley came to help out with the setup as well as the cleanup afterwards. The performers were also chosen by the youth of the valley.

The people seemed to enjoy the different performances, but Sotu really brought down the house with original music from his two albums. "It was such a great show," said Sotu, who came up from San Diego just to play the event for the fifth year in a row. "This literally is one of the highlights of the year for me. Seeing all of the people come together like that is amazing." Sotu added that he believed the event was what America is all about. "It's really nice to see the young and old of all different colors getting together and celebrating life. That's what it means to be an American. You can enjoy life without worrying about being segregated just because of the color of your skin."