

Fundraising effort picking up steam for MLK memorial

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Backers of a permanent National Mall memorial to Martin Luther King Jr. said Monday they are more than a third of the way toward their \$100 million fundraising goal.

"He is the foundation and the moral compass for our youth," Sheila Johnson, owner of the WNBA's Washington Mystics, said in announcing plans to give \$1 million on behalf of her two children.

Johnson was among several Martin Luther King Memorial Foundation leaders gathered on the Tidal Basin to launch the Kids for King campaign. The essay contest begins Wednesday and continues through June 1. Twelve winners will attend the Sept. 2006 groundbreaking ceremony on a four acre site not far from the Lincoln Memorial, where King made his famous "I Have a Dream" speech on Aug. 28, 1963.

"This monument is going to be built as a symbol," said Bill Russell, a member of the NBA Hall of Fame, who sat in the third row during that speech.

With \$39.5 million now committed, officials hope to raise another \$27 million by the groundbreaking. They hope to have \$100 million when the civil rights leader's memorial opens in 2008.

Since Congress authorized the project in 1996, most fundraising has focused on corporations. Increased emphasis is now being placed on individual donations.

"King's advocacy of nonviolent change is even more important today," said Gary Cowger, a vice president of General Motors, which has donated \$10 million. Board members are hoping publicity generated by donations from GM, Tommy Hilfiger USA, Time Warner, the NBA and the Washington Redskins will prompt more support from celebrities whose popularity is an indirect legacy of the civil rights movement.

"When the World War II Memorial people went public with the Tom Hanks ad, a groundswell of support flooded into their coffers. We expect the same thing to happen," said Ed Jackson Jr., executive architect of the project.

"King symbolizes all the great black leaders and the great revolution that took place in this country beginning with his great speech on the National Mall," said Jack Valenti, former president of the Motion Picture Association of America.

Valenti, a senior aide to President Lyndon B. Johnson, said the late president would have been pleased to see King honored with a memorial.



Above: Bill Russell and Harry E. Johnson, Sr. speak to the Washington, DC Girls and Boys Club youth.



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Above: Sheila Johnson announces \$1 million donation to the MLK National Memorial Foundation.