

Posted on Fri, Jun. 24, 2005

MIAMI

Fraternity brothers campaign for MLK monument

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Like most of his peers, Gregory Gay, 41, never met frat brother Martin Luther King Jr. As a child, he learned of the man and his visits to Miami, where he sometimes wrote speeches that later would inspire millions.

Now, along with other fraternity brothers, he hopes to build a national monument to the slain civil-rights leader and wants Miamians to help.

"He vacationed here, wrote speeches here, and tried them out here before he took them on the road. People should want to give," said Gay, chairman of local fundraising efforts.

On Saturday evening, Gay and members of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity bring the Building the Dream fundraising campaign to Miami. They will lobby corporations and individuals to give toward the first monument on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., that will be dedicated to a black person.

The campaign, coordinated by the Washington, D.C.-based Martin Luther King, Jr. National Memorial Project Foundation, must raise \$66 million to begin construction next year. Once it's completed, the responsibility for daily operations will go to the National Park Service.

Alpha Phi Alpha, the nation's oldest black greek-letter fraternity, conceived the project in the 1980s.

In 1996, Congress approved construction of the memorial and the spot on the Mall. The measure stipulated, however, that the monument would be built through private sources.

Efforts to raise money for the project have lagged. In the past eight years, the foundation raised \$38 million, just over half of the amount needed. Major donors so far include General Motors and Tommy Hilfiger Corp.

HOPEFUL

Harry Johnson, president of the foundation, is optimistic that donations will flow faster as news spreads. He said in previous years the foundation focused on tapping fraternity members and corporations.

"This is the public phase of the campaign," Johnson said. "We're trying to get the average American involved."

Gay believes Miamians can add to those coffers. The Miami chapter's fundraiser on Saturday at Parrot Jungle is one of dozens slated around the country this year. Every bit helps, Gay said. "There are a lot of South Florida corporations that don't have a clue that this is going on."

The memorial project -- slated for dedication in 2008 -- would honor the work and legacy of King, the leader of the civil-rights movement who was shot to death in 1968.

Project officials say the memorial will sit on a four-acre site between the Lincoln and Jefferson memorials.

Johnson said the location puts MLK in his rightful place.

THE RIGHT SPOT

"He would be amongst the other heroes. Jefferson, Lincoln and Washington were heroes of this country," he said. "It's our belief that King also was a hero of this country."

The proposed monument is particularly special to older Miami chapter members Timothy O'Hara Savage, 89, and Franklin Clark, somewhat younger at 67. Both men met King at fraternity or church functions in the 1950s.

Savage -- the eldest active chapter member -- prefers to leave fundraising to the younger folks. Clark hits up friends and whoever will listen.

"It's a source of inspiration to those who met him and lived in the era when he lived, and for the youngsters to come," Clark said. "This monument will be a presence in our lives, something we can look at and say a great man has passed through our lives."