

V101 - Mesa & MLK - AL

[Clip:](#)

I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation.

This is the beginning of one of the most famous speeches in American history. And if you don't recognize it by the well-known cadence of its speaker, you'll definitely know it by this line:

[Clip:](#)

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal.

Coined as the "I Have a Dream" speech, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr spoke to over 250,000 people on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. nearly 60 years ago. Today, the nation recognizes his birthday in honor of his life and commitment to the civil rights movement in America.

And in the city of Mesa, that honor is localized. Welcome to Valley 101, an Arizona Republic and azcentral podcast where we answer your questions about metro Phoenix. I'm producer Amanda Luberto and today, I share why celebrating MLK Jr in Mesa feels so personal to some.

theme up to fade

For the past 24 years, Mesa has been throwing an annual MLK parade and festival. It starts just off Center Street on Martin Luther King Jr Way near the Mesa Amphitheater and continues on through Downtown Mesa.

The parade is put on by the Mesa East Valley MLK Committee.

Keisha: my name is Kiesha McKinnor and I am the president of the Mesa East Valley, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration Committee.

Amanda: What a title.

Keisha: Yes, we do shorten it for the Mesa East Valley MLK Committee. Yeah.

Keisha joined me in the Arizona Republic podcast studio wearing a black blazer over a shirt with MLK Jr. printed on it. I started by asking simply what the committee does.

[00:00:48] **Keisha:** So the committee is responsible for the celebration that happens in Mesa every year, commemorating and honoring and celebrating the life and legacy of Dr. King. So every year in the city of Mesa, there is a parade and festival that is held

there, and we're responsible for helping to coordinate that and put that on within the city. It has branched out to not just be the Mesa MLK committee, but the Mesa East Valley. As we're reporting on the idea of inclusiveness and wanting to embrace the community, the community can be partner in sister cities around Mesa.

[00:01:29][41.0]

The parade has all of the things you'd normally see: city officials, school marching bands, city first responders, the committee. But it also puts organizations that are specific to Arizona's Black history on display as well.

[00:02:19] **Keisha:** The Buffalo soldiers, the Arizona Buffalo soldiers are always there and they will be there. We have Robinson Ranch, which is a black owned equestrian ranch, which is always there and will be there. [00:02:33][14.2]

Other community organizations like Big Brothers, Big Sisters of Central Arizona will be there along with Goodwill of North America.

[00:04:22] **Keisha:** They are there championing their diversity initiatives. And what a wonderful way to do that than to come out and partner in celebration of Dr. King. [00:04:31][8.4]

Keisha also mentioned that if you're interested in finding ways to get more involved in the local Black community, there will be organizations with booths there too after the parade. Black Eminence, which provides programs and services to the youth, will be in attendance. McKinnor's non-profit MKUU, which translates to chief in Swahili, focuses on leadership programs for girls 9 to 17 in marginalized areas. They will also be there.

[00:07:28] **Keisha:** There's so much opportunity for people to get involved, ~~but it's correct.~~ Oftentimes, they don't know who those organizations are or where they are, or a lot of the work that is being done in the community that may not get the exposure that or the other organizations get. So they will have some of these other smaller, maybe newer organizations that are out there putting in the work. And that's something that they also can always come and talk to us about the committee as well to try to match them with organizations that we know about in the community to the interests of those that want to get involved. [00:08:06][37.7]

music change

The city of Phoenix is also hosting a parade in honor of Dr. King and has been for 36 years. But the celebration in Mesa is very specific to its history with the national holiday.

[00:08:38] **Keisha:** it all started back in the 80s. You had a group of citizens that were wanting to bring in King Dr. King's birthday as being recognized as a national holiday. We know on a national level there was a big push for that to happen, and it finally did pass with President Reagan. ~~Passing laws and legislation for that~~
[00:09:07] [28.6]

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, there was almost an immediate push for Dr. King's birthday to be recognized as a national holiday following his assassination in 1968. Starting a few years later, cities and states across the US made January 15th, Dr. King's *actual* birthday, a holiday in his honor. Arizona was not one of them.

By 1983, Congress declared the third Monday of January would be celebrated as a federal holiday for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr and his unwavering devotion to equality in the United States. The first observance was in 1986.

[00:10:33] **Keisha:** And if you're not familiar with the history of the state of Arizona, it was kind of a turbulent time there, where it was passed. However, when then-Governor Mecham got in office the next year in ~~86~~ and 87, he rescinded the holiday and that kind of started a firestorm within the state and its citizens. ~~And all of that,~~
[00:10:59] [26.0]

Arizona's Governor at the time, Evan Mecham, decided that the state would not be recognizing the day as a national holiday, claiming that it was illegally created. And a lot of people were very upset....not just in Arizona, but across the US too...

[00:11:11] **Keisha:** a lot of corporations, a lot of artists began to pull their conferences and meetings and performances. And the Coupe de Gras, if you will, was when the NFL decided that they were not going to hold the Super Bowl here in 1990 because the state did not recognize Dr. King's holiday. [00:11:35] [23.7]

Not honoring the federal holiday magnified a moral dilemma for some and became an economic one for the entire Valley. [The 1993 Super Bowl was projected to bring in \\$200 million in revenue that the city had just lost out on.](#)

[00:17:11] **Keisha:** It was after that that the citizens of the state got together and got it as a ballot initiative and passed in 1992 to recognize Dr. King's birthday as a national holiday, which we first commemorated in the year of 1993. [00:17:30] [18.8]

The National Football League had said they would return the Super Bowl to Arizona after voters recognized MLK Day and it did just that. The competition was held at Sun Devil Stadium where the Cardinals played at the time in 1996. The Cowboys beat the Steelers 27-17; Diana Ross performed.

[*CLIP*](#)

music change

But the reason this holiday is so important to Mesa is because even after all of that..it still wasn't recognized there.

The Mesa MLK Committee that had just pushed to get it approved on the state level had to continue to work on getting it passed in their city.

[00:17:56] **Keisha:** Finally, in 1996, it was the voters passed passed, a law that recognizes Dr. King's birthday as a holiday, so it took some fighting. It took some perseverance really by those original members of the committee that formed the committee specifically for that purpose. But as soon as it was passed began to celebrate. They could really celebrate Dr. King, and not that they didn't before, but really on a more larger scale that we now are recognizing his birthday as a national holiday at the city level, the state level and, of course, the national level. [00:18:43][47.5]

I wondered if the fact that Arizona citizens took the initiative to vote for Dr. King's holiday meant it held more weight in Keisha's eyes. She said, of course, there are two sides to that.

[00:19:26] **Keisha:** I would begin to say no because we shouldn't have even gotten to that point correct where it should have been effortlessly passed at the state level. It should never have been rescinded. [00:19:39][12.9]

She adds that Arizonans should have been celebrating with the rest of the nation the whole time. But it also shows that there was a majority of people within the state that wanted to see his legacy recognized and people fought for that.

[00:19:59] **Keisha:** What it shows is that there was a community that was embracing that wanted to see that that championed diversity, that really cared about the legacy of Dr. King. So in one retrospect, you could say yes, it does mean a lot that the voters came out and voted for this legislation for Dr. King to be recognized. But it's also a sad state of affairs when you think about it, that they really for years had to fight to even get it as a ballot initiative and to get it passed [00:20:34][34.7]

When you think of Dr. King and the work he did during his life, you most likely think of the American South. Possibly Alabama because of the iconic, non-violent march from Selma to Montgomery that happened in 1965. But Keisha notes that Arizonans taking this holiday to the ballot showcases that his messaging had an impact across the whole country.

[00:20:56] **Keisha:** here were a lot of people that really cared for Dr. King, cared about his mission and his work and really supported, you know, his his mission of nonviolence and peace, but really to drive, to drive forward the civil rights legislation and equality and all of that [00:21:23][26.7]

music change

In 2014, something that feels like it only happens in the movies... happened in Phoenix. Mary Scanlon was searching through a box of reel to reel audio tapes in a local Goodwill when she discovered something special: a lost recording of Dr. King's speech at Arizona State University in 1964.

This speech occurred just one month before President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law.

Scanlon turned the tapes over to the ASU archivist at the time, Robert Spindler, and the speech in full is available to listen to on the ASU library website.

Keisha says this speech is proof that it was important to Dr. King to be in Arizona and that citizens rallied behind him here.

music up to fade

The push to get MLK Day acknowledged by Mesa was a main reason for the east valley based committee to form. But the city's history with segregation was another.

[00:23:37] **Keisha:** There were black citizens that could not get jobs in certain industries or with certain companies because of the color of their skin, or they were relegated to living in a certain part of town such as South Phenix or the Washington Escovedo neighborhood in Mesa, where that was considered black neighborhoods.

[00:24:36] **Keisha:** But it is very important for them, as they recognized a lot of the racial disparities that were going on within the city of Mesa and other cities and villages and towns throughout Arizona for them to continue to fight for that because it was prevalent here as well, not just the South. [00:24:54][18.1]

On a more national scale, the battles that Black Arizonans fought might get overlooked by the stories that came out of the American south. With the modernization of storytelling we have today, Keisha says it's easier to share that history.

[00:25:31] **Keisha:** the stories can get lost if they're not coming out of some of the more recognized states that were in the news at that

time. Let's say that. But the fight was going on here, and there's a lot of rich history within the black community right here in Arizona that people have access to. We have the George Washington Carver Museum that has a lot of that rich history, you know, deep in there. But these stories are now being told and are being told on or on a larger scale now and especially with, you know, mediums that we have nowadays with social mediums or technology and podcasting, you know, they're able to tell these stories, but they're there are rich stories to be told here and a lot of them, and they may not be nationally recognized, but they are here. [00:26:30][58.4]

More platforms has led to a wider audience that is listening, especially in modern times.

[00:27:46] **Keisha:** I would say that in recent years with these peaks, as I like to call them in the civil rights movement because the civil rights movement has never stopped. But we've seen peaks of it in recent years that this is heightened awareness and people are now. Some people are now more willing to be more understanding to listen more and want to generally know how can they play their part in making sure that we continue to move this needle forward
[00:28:15][29.3]

music up

Before she left, I asked Keisha what being a leader in this community meant to her. Modestly, she indicated the title doesn't mean as much to her as the work she's doing. She shared that growing up in Chicago, learning about Black history wasn't reserved for February...that it was 12 months out of the year.

But she's afraid that it might not continue that way...emphasizing that teaching the impact of Black leaders in America shouldn't be held for only the predominantly Black schools. This is part of her focus.

[00:28:47] **Keisha:** I don't get caught up in the title as much as I do in the work, and that is making sure that his legacy stays alive, that we are educating and teaching younger generations of the values that not only that Dr. King stood for, but a lot of the civil rights leaders of yesterday and today of the things that they fought for, why diversity, equity, inclusion and justice is so important, why that there is still the need to work towards making sure that we all live peacefully and harmonious, that if one isn't, you know? We all, you know, should feel the suffering of the others, so it's for me, it's it's really personal for me, it's personal. I'm making sure that that doesn't die. [00:29:46][58.8]

music break

The Mesa-East Valley MLK Celebration Committee is excited to have people back in person for the parade and festival this year. Keisha says she already can't wait for the big 25th anniversary in 2023.

Thank you so much for listening to this episode of Valley 101. If you would like to know more about the state's history or have any questions about metro phoenix, please submit them to our podcast by visiting Valley 101 dot azcentral dot com.

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Audio from today's episode came from NJ.com and Framepool Stock Footages as well as the NFL.

I'm producer Amanda Luberto, thank you again for listening. We'll see you next week.