Carnegie Mellon

Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration To Explore Environmental Justice

Carnegie Mellon’s annual celebration of the life and work of Martin Luther King Jr. will be held Monday, Jan. 21. Classes scheduled after 12:30 p.m. are canceled to encourage participation in a series of events at the University Center (UC).

Many of this year’s events focus on environmental justice, which examines how corporate and government policies disproportionately impact disadvantaged and minority communities.

“Our goal with this year’s celebration is to move beyond some of the common correlations made with Dr. King’s work,” said Director of Multicultural and Diversity Initiatives M. Shernell Smith.

“At the end of his legacy, Dr. King was looking not just at issues of race, but he also became more broadly concerned about social justice. Environmental justice is social justice.”

The celebration begins at noon with a community collage and choral tribute to King in Kirr Commons on the first floor of the UC. Carnegie Mellon President Jared Cohon will then present his “State of Diversity Address” at 12:30 p.m. in McConomy Auditorium.

The Martin Luther King Jr. Writing Awards, sponsored by the Creative Writing Department, will be presented to local high school students and Carnegie Mellon students at 1:30 p.m. in Rangos Hall. Winners will read narratives and poems regarding their personal experiences with racial difference and discrimination.

Professor of Creative Writing Terrance Hayes and Yona Harvey, a guest lecturer in the English Department, provided contestants with a variety of prompts, one of which encouraged students to interview their parents, grandparents or community members to come to a better personal understanding of environmental justice.

“Impacting relatives allows young people to hear from someone they trust how much landscapes change for better or worse in the span of a lifetime,” said Harvey. “A student might write a fascinating work, for example, if he or she were to learn that a neighborhood was once a dairy farm and is now a suburban housing development. Or, in an urban setting, a student might discover how a church was preserved (or left to deteriorate) after a fire or, less dramatically, after the simple passage of time.”

This year’s Community Conversation, a panel discussion among Carnegie Mellon’s MFA candidates, will explore how the history and culture of the community relates to environmental justice.

We have all come across them throughout the winter; lonely lost gloves — lumps of cotton, wool or leather — that lay on the sidewalk or on the bus stop seat. Until now, most were lost to their owners forever.

Jennifer Gooch, a graduate student in the School of Art, has created a way for those of us who find those lost gloves to return them to their rightful owners. Gooch has created the Web site onecoldhand.com, where she posts pictures of the lost gloves she collects, with a description and location of where each was found.

Gooch says the project creates a humorous yet bittersweet solution for an everyday loss. Documents and photos of abandoned gloves are showcased on the Web site in the hopes that their owners will reclaim them.

“People respond differently when finding lost gloves. Some will leave them while others pick them up or throw them away,” said Gooch, who thinks that picking up someone’s forgotten glove is also an act of kindness.

“For me, collecting and saving the lost gloves becomes an act of kindness,” she said. “I started collecting them when I realized that they were often found on busy streets and could be dangerous for drivers.”
We can really do a lot in terms of informing the work of organizations driven by a social mission and developing tools and blueprints." —ISI Director Alan Friedman

philanthropic methods and seeking out opportunities to sell their products and services in a way that will help to reach humanitarian goals along with earnings targets.

With an array of programming including classroom instruction, project courses and guest faculty members, Carnegie Mellon’s Institute for Social Innovation (ISI), housed within the Heinz School, is preparing future social sector leaders to thrive in this emerging entrepreneurial environment.

“The Institute for Social Innovation was founded with social change agents in mind,” said ISI Director Alan Friedman. “Through education, collaboration such as Nonprofit Marketing, along with relevant classes in the Tepper School of Business, the School of Design and the School of Computer Science.

This year, the institute has expanded its efforts, introducing new courses, such as the microfinance and social enterprise incubator mini-courses listed for the spring semester. The ISI also has brought the field’s leaders, such as Indian social activist Sandeep Pandey and social enterprise pioneer Jerr Boschee, to campus for lectures and other programs. Pandey taught a three-day course on building organizations that drive scalable and sustainable social change. The ISI has emphasized project work for its students as well. Last semester, a team of 13 students worked with the Manchester Bidwell Corporation (MBC), a local nonprofit that is widely regarded as an exemplar of social entrepreneurship, to develop the organization’s national replication strategy.

“I couldn’t have asked for a better result,” said the course’s instructor, Al Mercer, who is an adjunct faculty member at Carnegie Mellon. Mercer noted that MBC leadership intended to act on the students’ recommendations quickly as the organization continues to expand its nationwide presence.

Kedar Kamalaparkar, who led a five-student team developing a strategic plan for the Veterans Leadership Project, valued the experience of applying the knowledge he gained in the classroom.

“Anytime you go from learning from a book to putting the principles to use in a real-life situation, you have to make some adjustments,” said Kamalaparkar, a first-year public policy and management student. “I think the classroom instruction was vital. That knowledge helped us prepare for the hiccups we encountered along the way.”

This semester, students will work with MetLife on strategies to help the company do its part to curtail global warming — and potentially cut down on the extreme weather events that may make its product unaffordable — by making its many real estate holdings greener.

Also this month, the institute is launching a social enterprise business plan competition, modeled after similar for-profit startup contests. The winners will receive more than $20,000 in seed funding to launch their ventures, Friedman said.

The competition, as well as new social innovation fellowships, are made possible with corporate and alumni support. The institute is also practicing what it preaches, in terms of balancing earned and contributed income, by exploring options in executive education.

As the ISI continues to evolve, establishing a solid research foundation will be a top priority.

“There is a lot of anecdotal evidence, but not a lot of quantitative evaluation of social impact, measuring social return on investment or research into organizational structures,” Friedman said. “We can really do a lot in terms of informing the work of organizations driven by a social mission and developing tools and blueprints.”

Friedman also noted his hope to engage more faculty from schools and departments throughout the university in the institute’s work.

“I’m planning to convene a group of faculty from the Heinz School and beyond to really dig in to opportunities to position Carnegie Mellon as a thought leader in this field,” he said.

World Peace Through Video Games? Research To Study Gamers’ Approaches to Middle East Conflict Resolution

Maybe a video game can save the world. Sound far-fetched? Perhaps. But Cleotilde Gonzalez thinks that video games have a lot to teach us about problem-solving and how players’ biases influence what they do when confronted with one of the most intractable problems of all.

Gonzalez, director of the university’s Dynamic Decision Making Laboratory, is using the PeaceMaker video game — which calls on players to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict — to study how a person’s background and knowledge of the conflict influences how they negotiate a solution. Gonzalez is conducting her research at Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh, Carnegie Mellon in Qatar and through the Peres Center for Peace in Israel, where as many as 10,000 Israeli and Palestinian youth will participate in the study.

Impact Games, the Carnegie Mellon spin-off that produces PeaceMaker, has helped Gonzalez modify the game so that it can collect data — essentially, recording every decision that players make in attempting to win the game.

“We are building a story of the strategies that students take in the game,” said Gonzalez, an associate research professor in the Department of Social and Decision Sciences.

In PeaceMaker, each player assumes the role of the Israeli or Palestinian leader and is presented with a scenario in which multiple and interrelated choices are made in a constantly changing environment. Gonzalez said that while many people have studied sequential decision making, research has rarely focused on this kind of realistic, dynamic decision making.

“To this point I have mostly studied individual decision makers that play with ‘nature’ rather than with another smart partner. In PeaceMaker, the actions depend on the reactions of the other side, and a two-state solution is the only way to win this game,” Gonzalez said.

“The incentives to win the game are not purely dependent on your own well-being but on the well-being of your partner, too. The incentives of the players in this game may interact in complex ways and further depend on the knowledge and beliefs that you bring to the game,” she said.

With funding from the Lounsberry Foundation, Gonzalez is working with Kiron Skinner, director of the International Relations Program, and Laurie Eisenberg, associate teaching professor of history, who teaches a course titled “The Arab-Israeli Condition: War and Peace.” Students in the class play the game at the beginning of the semester and again at the end of the course. Eisenberg and Gonzalez have developed questions to gauge the students’ familiarity with the conflict.

Gonzalez will track how students’ views change over the course of the semester and how this influences their gameplay. She wants to know, among other things, whether understanding both sides of the story helps players resolve the conflict successfully.

“We see this project as a first step in advancing our research in applying decision science and simulation techniques to real-life social and political dilemmas. Our findings stand to improve training services in crisis management and conflict resolution,” Gonzalez said.

Gonzalez will also conduct a similar study with students at Carnegie Mellon’s campus at Education City in Doha, Qatar, and she also hopes to include students at the other American campuses at Education City. At the Peres Center in Israel, a study will be run through the center’s IT Peace Projects Department. Israeli and Palestinian youth will participate in a series of workshops in which each child will play PeaceMaker as both the Israeli prime minister and the Palestinian leader.