Thank you to Elaine Grant, to Dr. Jane Grassadonia, to Sister Helen Marie Burns, to Reverend Jackson and to Joe Patterson. This is my 17th Dr. Martin Luther King Commemoration, but my first here at Mt Aloysius College. I am grateful that these good people came together and carried out this important project. Thank you.

I just want to share three quick thoughts with you as we contemplate today the memory of Dr. King and we think about people all over the world for whom his message was intended.

First, I want to tell you that Dr. King’s message is universal, it is timeless and it is global. Dr. King is best known for his non-violent campaign against racial injustice in America, but his message resonated far beyond our borders. His I Have a Dream speech was a wake-up call for a generation here in America, but it has served as a clarion call for peoples all over the globe in the 49 years since he delivered it on the Mall in Washington, D.C., standing at the feet of the Abraham Lincoln Memorial, looking out at the Reflecting Pool. Since that day, it has been translated into dozens of languages, it has been shown on the airwaves in over 100 countries, it has played on thousands of radio stations all over the globe and it has been reprinted millions of times—aired, played and reprinted in places you never imagined.

When Nelson Mandela spent those decades inside a South African prison, he spent them with Martin Luther King at his side, as personal inspiration and as constant reading material. When two brave women decided to march against the legacy of bombs and bullets that was Ireland’s history, they did so with Martin Luther King as their inspiration and their guidebook. When Suu Kyi fought her decades long non-violent battle for rights in Indonesia, she did it with the memory of Dr. King at her side. All three of these women followed Dr. King in one other way—they all won the Nobel Peace Prize.
In 1979, 33 years ago, I took a leave of absence from Yale Law School, determined to spend the next two years as a volunteer with the Peace People in Belfast, Northern Ireland. The first day that I showed up at their door, armed with 2/3rds of a law degree, a backpack and not much else, one of the first things these people did was hand me a copy of their little newspaper to read—which they suggested I do while I waited to explain to them how I might be helpful to their work. On the front page of their newspaper, Peace by Peace, was a photograph not of an Northern Irish civil rights leader, not of a survivor of their famous underground railroad, not a person who had been unjustly imprisoned in Long Kesh, not a political hero from Derry or Belfast, not Robert Emmet or James Connolly or Michael Davitt or Padraig Pearce or Mairead Corrigan Maguire.

No, when I arrived at the Headquarters of the Peace People in September of 1979, I discovered that the front page of their newspaper was devoted to a photo of Dr. Martin Luther King, and inside was a reprint of his *I Have a Dream* speech, one of the million or so places I have since come to learn that it was reprinted.

Imagine my surprise—flying 3,000 miles to Belfast, leaving the America that had nurtured and educated me, going back to the country where my grandparents left poverty, pogrom and penal laws behind and, landing there in the heat of the Troubles (as its virtual Civil War was then called), landing on an island where in three years I met one black man, and in that country, among those men and women of peace, I find on my very first day there that their hero, the front page of their first edition of their little newspaper, was an African American man from my country.

Imagine my surprise—and this was long before we had a national holiday devoted to the man, and long before his legacy was so openly embraced here in our own country. So when I tell you today that Dr. King’s message is universal and global and timeless, I mean that in a very personal way.

**Second, Dr. King’s message is a very personal message**—he speaks to each one of you at this college founded by the Sisters of Mercy, who trace their origins to a woman who devoted her life to caring for the least among us—the homeless, the sick, the distraught and the dispossessed. He speaks directly to you, at this institution where core values of mercy and justice, service and hospitality reign.

You know, I play a little game with myself on this day every year. I try to imagine where Dr. King would be today if he were alive. What injustice would he be railing against, where would he be leading a thousand marchers, where would he be spending his time and his resources, whose challenges would benefit from the energy of his eloquence, and from the power of his passion.
Two years ago, I know he would have been in Haiti after the earthquake and six years before that on the Gulf Coast after the hurricanes and the year before that in south Asia after the Tsunami took 200,000 lives. I knew that because Dr. King said that “(we are all) caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.” Dr. King would have said that the greatest impact of the Haiti earthquake and the Katrina hurricane and the South Asian tsunami was not in the devastation caused but in the desperation revealed. And Dr. King would say that our long-term response to the challenge of Haiti and to all the “Haitis” in our own country is the real test of this day in his honor.

And if we are going to continue that work, and show that we respect and we understand Dr. King’s words about the “inescapable network of mutuality,” then we have to commit to addressing the poverty and not just answering the earthquake, or the tsunami or the hurricane or the hunger or the homelessness or the injustice.

On another occasion, Dr. King observed that “the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are promissory notes.” And what Katrina, with all its might, revealed more than anything else to anyone willing to look is that there are still whole parts of our own country, and even our own region, where those “promissory notes” have yet to be delivered on. And our long term response to that desperation is the real challenge ahead for all who believe in the fundamental message of Dr. King—that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

Third, I want to thank the more than 800 of our students who lived out Dr. King’s legacy just last semester—that is the number of our students who worked on community service projects last fall. Because of you, Dr. King’s words don’t just live on today in this commemoration ceremony once every year. They live on every day, every time one of our students...

- works at the local food bank, or
- helps out at the homeless shelter, or
- prepares another person’s tax form, or
- tutors someone else’s son or daughter, or
- collects coats for children, or
- grants the wishes of an angel from our Christmas tree, or
- builds houses in Biloxi
- teaches in Jamaica
- travels to mission work in Guyana or even this year to China.
Every time one of our students reaches out to give someone a hand up, every time one of our community reaches into another person’s life, every time one of our team stands up for another person’s rights, every time you do those things, you are living out Dr. King’s mission. Last semester, more than half of all our students reached out to help another life, working with 123 different community programs, and contributing almost 5000 hours of service.

I am proud to be at this College for many reasons, but perhaps none more than this reason. Thank you all for living out Dr. King’s legacy so well and so often.