

In February of 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered a sermon titled "The Drum Major Instinct," where he expressed the idea that "everybody can be great because everybody can serve" (King, 1968a). Fifty-two years later, Dr. King's message is still being used to inspire Americans to give back by volunteering in their communities (Corporation for National and Community Service, n.d.). While his sermon was grounded in his Christian theology, his call to service may also be attributed to the work of Black feminist leaders in the 1800s.

Much like Dr. King's definition of greatness, early Black feminist leaders knew that when we take time to serve others, the benefit goes beyond the recipient, and includes empowering the provider of the service (Abdullah, 2007). In the late 19th century, The National Association of Colored Women's Clubs' used the motto "Lifting as We Climb" for their club (Abdullah, 2007). In doing so, they emphasized the importance of collaborating to empowering the whole community (Abdullah, 2007). Taking time to understand the implications of this motto has helped me understand the ways that I, too, can be part of a social justice movement both as a Cal State LA student and as a citizen.

When a university takes a social justice lens, as Cal State LA has, it has the power to shift the collective values of its students to include giving back, lifting up, and tapping into our empowerment. I believe this to be part of what Dr. King described as a "revolution of values"—shifting our values to focus on taking action to advance issues for all of humanity (King, 1968b, p. 199). My education has been directly enriched via the University's model of civic engagement and service learning. As a senior, I have engaged in service learning in two of my courses. My service has included driving community members in-need to and from their medical appointments for the American Cancer Society. I have also volunteered for an organization in Altadena, where I worked to connect community members in need of goods or services directly with neighbors who can help fulfill those requests. I was aware early on that the service requirement in these courses would be transformative because it shifted how I was engaging with the community around Los Angeles. What I did not understand, at first, was how it would expand my ideas about the type of social justice impact that I can make in this lifetime.

The words of Dr. King on greatness, along with the history of the Black feminist movement, has reframed my idea of community service and volunteering. When we realize, as both a person and as a collective, that we can enact meaningful change in our community—then we understand that our real strength is the power we have to lift those around us. This

understanding leaves me emboldened to keep pushing a future that has a shared idea of accountability that includes reparations, transformative justice, and compassionate to service to those around us.

References

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