Davidson remembers Martin Luther King, Jr.

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On Jan. 19, Davidson College offered students, faculty, and community members the chance to remember and celebrate the achievements of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement. Afternoon classes were canceled, and students were encouraged to attend the variety of seminars that took place at the Union.

The theme of the day was “Spreading the Dream.” Seminars on six different topics, including women in the Civil Rights Movement and Dr. King’s perspective on affirmative action, contributed to the spreading of knowledge and the sparking of much discussion and contemplation.

A lecture and discussion entitled “Women in the Civil Rights Movement” was led by Davidson’s Dr. Sally McMillen. Opening with a historical look at the black woman as a slave, McMillen discussed the family life and the working conditions for these women, who faced three types of discrimination. First, they were discriminated against because they were women, second, because they were black, and third, because they were slaves.

Focusing on the struggles they faced, McMillen then progressed through history by discussing the black woman’s role in the church during the late 19th century. At that time, black women led Sunday school and focused on religious faith, while addressing the violence and the downfall of black American men of the times.

The church was the center of the African-American community, particularly during the 1950s and ‘60s. McMillen suggested that the strength people found in their religions gave them more strength to overcome and triumph during the turmoil of the Civil Rights Movement. “Most African-Americans turned inward to their communities to help each other lift their pride,” said McMillen.

Sitting in on the seminar was Brenda Tapia, who runs a program at Davidson called “Common Ground.” This program seeks to bridge the racial gap between students on campus. Tapia said, “Quite often we have a tendency to think we can only help our own. We need to reach out and get past that.”

Later, in the 900 Room, Dr. Russ Snapp and Dr. Barbara Ballard led a discussion entitled “RACE: Shaping Our Perceptions of Ourselves and Others.” They began the discussion by stating that race is an ideology that has no scientific foundation.

They encouraged students to abandon the word “race” because it carries many negative connotations. First, race implies a hierarchy and it is this notion of a hierarchy that allows discrimination to continue. Secondly, “race” is often used to separate the “white race” from all other races. By dignifying the “white race,” people are negatively focusing on the condition of not being colored. Thus, “race,” in this sense, hinders the progression toward equality.

After establishing their argument against the use of the word “race,” Snapp and Ballard opened the topic for discussion. The first question a student asked was, “How does a black get over being black when everyone else discriminates against him or her?” Snapp responded by saying that a black cannot stop thinking of himself in terms of a black until everyone can stop thinking in terms of race. He went on to say that this sort of outlook is more realistically a long term goal and something that can only occur after many other changes take place.

Many students felt that African-Americans should not look at themselves as simply Americans. As freshman Allen Lee said on the topic of recognizing the achievements of African-Americans, “There’s one win for us. We need to know that black people are making strides and achievements.” Many students seemed to support Lee’s sentiment for strong black role models.

Senior Joy Sparks said, “We need to look at the United States as more of a salad bowl than as a melting pot. We need to appreciate all the ingredients: the croutons, the lettuce, and the tomatoes.”

This idea provoked a few warm chuckles of agreement, and led the conversation to how comfortable minorities feel in this country, in the South, and on this campus.

Programs like the BSC and “Common Ground” can help students feel more comfortable with their peers, particularly their peers of another race.

Davidson is always attempting to become more diverse, but we need to remember the question that freshman Jehan Shamsid-Deen posed: “Are we doing everything we can, and if we do achieve greater diversity, will we take advantage of that?”