

300 honor King in R'ville ceremony

By GIDOET FUENTES

Journal Staff Writer

Despite cold rain and gloomy skies, a crowd of 300 turned out in Rockville yesterday to commemorate the anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s birth.

The size of the crowd surprised and heartened city officials, who saw only 45 people turn out for a similar ceremony a year ago.

"It far exceeded our expectations," said Dana Presberry, executive director of the Rockville Human Rights Commission.

"We're going to have to consider moving" the ceremony from the City Hall atrium to larger quarters next year, he added.

The highlight of yesterday's ceremony was the presentation of the Rockville Human Rights Commission's Human Rights Equal Opportunity Employment Award.

Suburban Maryland Fair Housing was commended for its employment and use of minorities and women in fair housing testing and evaluation programs. The Mount Calvary Baptist Church was praised for its establishment of the Helping Hand shelter, which provides food, housing, clothing, counseling and job training for the homeless.

"We would like to show them that the city and the Human Rights Commission are looking out for human rights," said Michael Taff, chairman of the Human Rights Commission.

"We hope to publicize the fact that the recipients of the awards are leaders in the business community in human rights, as far as employment goes," Taff said. The ceremony highlighted not only the accomplishments of area employers, but also actions by the city.

Rockville Mayor Steven Van Grack called it "an expression of appreciation for all we've accomplished."

The event was filled with praise for those in the community who have participated in anti-discriminatory efforts. Van Grack praised the city council for passing resolutions condemning apartheid in South Africa and human rights violations in the Soviet Union and Chile.

He also commended the Human Rights Commission for hiring a full-time investigator to examine complaints of unfair housing and for increasing its testing program to catch discriminatory practices in housing.

Presberry was struck by the "diversity of participation," which included an invocation by the Rabbi Jack Laxenburg of Temple Beth Ami, consecration by the Rev. Albert Mosee of Jerusalem United Methodist Church and entertainment by the Mount Calvary Baptist Church Chancel Choir and the Metrolarks, a local chorus.

"They were representative of the community at large," Presberry said.

"In light of the recent instances of racial violence which have occurred in cities across the nation, this day is of even greater significance as a time of hope," Van Grack said, in a address to the crowd.

He pointed to the attack by whites on blacks in Howard Beach, N.Y., and the plight of the black cadets at

The Citadel in South Carolina as examples that "we need to recognize that there is much to be done."

Van Grack praised the "Say No To Drugs Campaign," a project suggested by the Alliance of Concerned Citizens of the Rockville Area, and the City Employee Training programs of the Human Relations Commission.

"We must remember Dr. King's belief that 'injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,'" Van Grack said. "If the memory of Dr. King is to be upheld, it must be done by extending his life's work and continuing to struggle for the principles in which he believed."

One resident who attended the early afternoon ceremony said it was heartening.

"I was pleased to see what they are doing here in the county," said Lawrence Cross, of Rockville. "There are a lot of things I can relate to" which were addressed. Cross, who attended the ceremony with his two children, said, "I'm glad they had a chance to participate."