

Commission awards WVU professor with 'Living the Dream' award

By Hollie Greene | Posted: Thursday, March 12, 2015 11:24 pm

Raised by his grandparents in the rural eastern North Carolina, West Virginia University's College of Law professor Atiba Ellis' dedication to civil and human rights became evident at an early age.

"As a kid, I spent a lot of time reciting Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'I Have a Dream' speech," Ellis said.

Recently, the Martin Luther King Jr. State Holiday Commission awarded the "Living the Dream" award for his continued passion.

Every year, the commission honors King by acknowledging citizens who continue his fight for civil rights and advocate for peace.

According to Deputy Commissioner Jacqueline Proctor, chair of the Living the Dream committee, Ellis was selected for the award because of his dedication to education and voters' rights issues.

Ellis' work has mainly focused on what he referred to as the "problem of voter denial."

This refers to bias in the law that can cause voters on the margin to be dissuaded from casting their votes. He proposed this problem is caused in part by voter identification laws that require citizens to provide ID and proof of citizenship at the polls in some states.

Ellis also argued in his research that Americans have certain ideologies about who is and is not fit to vote. He connected these arguments to the United States' history of discrimination.

The beliefs Ellis holds dear on the issues of civil rights are a direct reflection of the values held by the State Holiday Commission.

"It's important that generations behind Dr. King know of his work, what he stood for and what his legacy means..." Proctor said. "We feel that Dr. King's work will certainly move forward the national consciousness of civil rights and the incredibly negative impact of discrimination,"

When prompted about his beliefs, Ellis responded with similar sentiments.

"I think recognizing my work represents the commission's view that the modern civil rights movement needs to continue. The same issues that were problematic at the time of Selma and the Voting Rights Act years ago are still problems for the marginalized in our society today..." Ellis said. "My work, among many others, is the kind of work that needs to continue happening."

Though he recognized the great achievements by civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks and Fannie Lou Hamer, Ellis said he felt most inspired by the unrecognized victims of discrimination. He is motivated to continue his fight for equality by those whom he believes are being wronged.

Both Ellis and Proctor expressed their deep desire for the civil rights movement to be carried on by today's youth.

"My request to anyone, particularly young people," Proctor said, "is to remember that the latitude of freedom that we enjoy, which those before us worked so hard for, should not be taken for granted."