

Dr. King's vision still inspires hope

UNM law professor speaks to personal missions at Labs' Martin Luther King Jr. Day event

By **Luke Frank**

Audience members leaned forward in their chairs as they listened to UNM law professor Sonia Gipson Rankin speak about Martin Luther King Jr.'s work during Sandia's MLK 2020 Celebration and Day of Reflection at the Steve Schiff Auditorium on Jan. 20.

Rankin, a researcher and recognized expert on laws and their impacts on America's black communities, was invited by Sandia's Black Leadership Committee to speak at this year's event.

The celebration opened with a performance of the American national anthem by Sandia's Juanita Evans, followed by the playing of the black national anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing." After a brief prologue by Deputy Labs Director Dori Ellis, Rankin immediately captured the room with her presentation, "Arcing Toward Justice: Dr. King's 2020 vision."

Rankin recalled vividly the time she visited Washington, D.C., and stood just below the Lincoln Memorial on the very spot where Dr. King gave his famous "I have a dream" civil rights speech. "I remember how impactful that was for me," she said, "thinking back to what it must have looked and felt like that day."

Rankin talked about Dr. King's last sermon before his assassination, citing a quote that served as the basis of her presentation: "We shall overcome, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

"Arcs are about movement related to a path," Rankin said. "Scientists can relate to that, right? That's what Dr. King's mission was, an arc that continues moving down a path borne of personal passion. His mission was about membership — being accepted as a voice in society."

She challenged the audience to look within for personal passion — something they would be doing if they didn't have to work. Hers is telling the story of Black America. "Your passion informs your personal mission," she said.

Rankin cautioned that we should be aware of hidden predispositions within ourselves in our undertakings as citizens and Sandians. "Implicit bias is so deeply ingrained as part of our core beliefs that even if we recognize it, we can't say where it came from," she said. "We need to recognize and counter it, both through education and legislation."

"Let's take artificial intelligence for example," Rankin said. She talked about the remarkable progress in developing algorithms used for applications like a GPS in your car and the functionality of social media. "But," she said, "right now, AI has the sense of an 18-month-old."

"It's gotten some things right, like driving directions and Snapchat functionality, but AI is bigger than that," Rankin said. "Artificial intelligence is off in other algorithms, like those that decide credit ratings, employment screenings, student loans and admissions. Algorithms are powerful tools, but we still need that human element — humanity — in designing them for things like healthcare eligibility and prison recidivism. Our code writers have an incredibly important and difficult job to keep data and algorithms unbiased."

"Things seem great right now; the economy's strong, the stock market's up, unemployment is down, there's a large decline in blacks in our prisons," Rankin said. "Yet we still have the highest suicide rate in the U.S. that we've had in a long time." Suicide rates have increased in nearly every state over the past two decades, and half of the states have seen suicide rates go up more than 30%, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.



MORAL UNIVERSE — UNM Law Professor Sonia Gipson Rankin captivates her audience in the Steve Schiff Auditorium during her presentation at the Labs' MLK 2020 Celebration and Day of Reflection on Jan. 20. **Photo by Lonnie Anderson**

Rankin's words encouraged the audience to have hope. "So things look right but don't quite feel right," she said. "This is something MLK predicted: that we should look for a massive act of conscience.

"It won't feel right, but it's going to get right," she said. "That's the arc to which Dr. King referred and the reason his principles still live today, no matter the time or circumstance." [t](#)

