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Empowerment Congress Draws Crowds

More than 1,500 people – from ordinary citizens to elected officials, academic, religious and business leaders – gathered at USC’s Bovard Auditorium on Saturday to take part in the 23rd annual Empowerment Congress.

With the theme, *50 Years Later: Chaos or Community*, the summit shone a spotlight on pivotal civil rights events in 1965 and their continuing relevance today.

Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas stressed it was ordinary citizens doing extraordinary deeds who won passage of the landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965.

“They made it happen for us,” Ridley-Thomas said of the men and women who risked their lives to march with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., from Selma to Montgomery to demand the right to vote. “When we use our rights to advance community interests and increase civic engagement, we can secure victories such as a new train station at Leimert Park, the rebirth of a new MLK Medical Center campus, civilian oversight of the Sheriff’s Department and much more. If we stay on course, we can do tremendous things.”

The prominent author and academic, Cornel West, served as keynote speaker at the plenary session.

“Oh how beautiful it is to have all of us together,” he told the crowd. “It’s so rare in America for us to have a coming together, across race, across culture, even across class, trying to keep track of our fundamental humanity.”

Supervisor Hilda Solis, who also attended the plenary session, said, “Dr. King’s legacy should serve as a reminder to our communities that empowerment is still the first step on the march to justice.”

Los Angeles County Sheriff Jim McDonnell talked about ways the community can work together with law enforcement to prevent crime. He said there should be less focus on suppression, and more on addressing the underlying causes of crime.

The plenary session also included a spoken word performance by the award-winning young poets of *Get Lit*, a nationally recognized organization created to reach at-risk teens.

After the plenary session, participants attended forums on such issues as jail diversion programs, the fight against child sex trafficking, and the push for a living wage.

Get Lit’s Belissa Escobedo, 16, found the experience inspiring. “I think a lot of times, for a lot of youth, it’s difficult to be part of your community and be socially aware of what’s going on,” she said. “For me, being here was very empowering.”

The Empowerment Congress was born in the aftermath of the civil unrest in Los Angeles in 1992. Ridley-Thomas, then a Los Angeles City Councilman, wanted to create a model of civic engagement based on the principles of participatory democracy, reciprocal accountability and intentional civility. Now in its 23rd year, the Empowerment Congress is considered a forerunner to the neighborhood council movement nationwide.

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