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Saevon and KaJohnna performed an acoustic duet at the Diversity Expo on Monday.

# After the MLK march

Art, activism and unity at  
downtown Diversity Expo

BY MOZES ZARATE / mozesz@newsreview.com

"Lady, you need to give up your seat," the driver yells to the back of the bus. Silence. We're locked in an antique Sacramento Transit Authority bus for a reenactment of the birth of the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

"I paid my fare, I can sit here," says Darlene Tellis, playing Rosa Parks. It's unsettling to watch. They argue, she holds her ground and he threatens to call the police before storming off. The scene ends with Tellis walking to the front of the bus in song, filling the aisle with her voice in "Still I Rise" by Yolanda Adams.

The boycott lasted 381 days, Tellis tells the crowd of kids and parents, and tens of thousands of dollars in public transit revenues were lost every day before a 1956 U.S. Supreme Court decision declared that Alabama's segregated bus laws were unconstitutional.

"It shows what you can do when people get together and think on one accord," Tellis says.

Once off the bus, we joined thousands bustling inside the Sacramento Convention Center at booths, stages, crafts stations and dining tables. The performance was part of the annual Diversity Expo, the destination Monday of the March For the Dream celebrating the life of Martin Luther King Jr.

Historical preservation was a key theme of the event, and there was a lot to learn in one afternoon. At a booth for the Buffalo Soldiers Motorcycle Club, who have more than 100 chapters in the United States, members chatted about the 150-year old Army regiment that fought in both world wars. On a side stage,

a Morehouse College classmate of King preached the importance of hard work to preserve the progress of the 20th century as others seek to dial it back, and a genealogist gave advice on how to figure out your ancestry.

"There's an education piece, an activation piece, and piece of inspiration that we want people to walk away with," said Paul Willis, an artist and advocate who curated the main-stage entertainment. "We know every year that we get people who come from all different types of backgrounds who may or may not know those different parts of the civil rights legacy."

On a main stage, a bill of extraordinary Sacramento artists performed in short sets. Some highlights: The Genesis Church Choir spurred the crowd with electric gospel songs. Rapper Consci8us, with the charisma of a youth leader and rap star, carried a message of perseverance in his song "Black Lives Shatter." Sixteen-year-old Carly Rhoades did justice to "I am Changing," originally sung by Jennifer Hudson in the movie *Dreamgirls*. Hip-hop artist Saevon and R&B/soul-singer KaJohnna delivered a sweet and somber acoustic duet, and Willis closed the afternoon with masterclass rhymes punctuated by freestyle hip-hop dance from Jah'Soul Amaru and sax melodies by Masud Kiburi-Cunningham.

"I think it's important that the arts matched the message for the day," Willis said. So that's how we start. Identifying artists who, in the music, share the same values as MLK."

History was made outside the convention center on Monday. There were two marches—the March For the Dream, led by MLK365, and the separate Reclaim MLK march, led by Black Lives Matter Sacramento. Willis said the marchers represent two different philosophies in achieving racial justice: reformation from the inside, and revolution from the outside.

The marches typically converge in a show of solidarity, interacting mostly through chants. This year, march leaders, MLK365's Sam Starks and BLM Sac's Tanya Faison, joined each other on stage. It was their first public conversation, Willis said.

"It was an opportunity to build an understanding," Willis said. "We see you, we know where you stand, and the other side saying the same thing."