

## Beyond the Dream

### *A new future for Martin Luther King Recreation Center*

*by Zoe Hillengas*

In the past 6 months, M.L. King Recreation Center has caught the attention of not only its immediate North Philadelphia neighborhood, but the entire city. Major label rap artist and North Philadelphia native Meek Mill held a turkey drive at the center before Thanksgiving and featured footage of the day in [a video set to his music](#). In addition, the Philadelphia 76ers selected King for their NBA Cares program to hold a fitness clinic in October, and Emmy Award winning television chef [Christina Pirello](#) and the Phillies Phanatic paid visits in Fall 2013 as well.

“These guests and events may seem like we are bringing fun to kids for just one day,” explains Assistant REACH Coordinator and Coach Meka Perez, “but they are actually opening their eyes to new horizons. Many of these kids never knew what a turkey dinner was until now.”

Speaking of new horizons, something else has been taking place beyond the media coverage and guests: major revitalization efforts spearheaded from within the center itself.

Good things started trickling in when Meka came on board in September to help implement REACH (Philadelphia Parks & Recreation’s new youth development system) at King. However the new gym floor that was installed over the summer would not be open until October, and as it stood, Meka’s overwhelming first impression of King was “dark, dreary and lifeless.” “I wanted to bring color and vibrancy to the center,” she remembers, and that’s exactly what she and other staff members did.

As if 10 years of professional education experience and a deep understanding of the culture, personal circumstances and needs of youth in Philadelphia’s 22<sup>nd</sup> Police District were not already a major asset to bring to the center, Meka and Curriculum Director Bahiya Jones have also managed to change their students’ physical learning environment. By working with King’s on-site muralist Leroy Thomas Moses (known to most as “Mr. Moses”), the after school room is now home to a colorful, vibrant tree mural.

Beyond the REACH programs, a prominent example of the center’s physical transformation is embodied by the mural of Martin Luther King, Jr. that was installed in the gymnasium as a part of this year’s Annual Martin Luther King Day of Service organized by The PhillyRising Collaborative, Philadelphia Parks & Recreation, Playing for Peace and the City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program. Mural painting was opened up to the community and completed the same day, with help from roughly 406 volunteers from all walks of life.

Not only did the mural transform the gymnasium, but it was also a turning point for Mr. Moses, a city employee for more than 30 years and an individual who grew up during the lifetime of Martin Luther King, Jr. “He was in awe that we are still honoring MLK today,” Meka explains. “Not only honoring the person but putting him in a place in the center for everyone to see.” The mural is indeed highly visible. Since the new gym floor installation, the basketball court is King’s number one feature, with 100-200 young males frequenting the gymnasium every night.

In an effort to continue both physical and emotional transformations in the long term, Meka and Bahiya will launch a new theme for Martin Luther King Day 2015 called “Beyond the Dream”. This theme will raise the question: What would MLK be talking about today? “We noticed how the older community is stuck on ‘I Have a Dream’ and forget that MLK died for a cause,” Meka explains.

“Beyond the Dream represents our interpretation of what MLK would want to see for the center today. We’re moving forward, revamping our education system, not staying in the past. Showing unity in the community, bringing a sense of family, community and home to students that wouldn’t get it otherwise. This represents the new dream, the new vision. That’s the Path we’re on.”