Looking around a meeting room containing a number of young faces Saturday night, a moderator for a program honoring Martin Luther King Jr. acknowledged the generation gap between the late Dr. King and some audience members.

"Many of us in the room grew up in the same time period in which he lived and became a leader," Cheryl Yellow Fawn Scott told a crowd of more than 100 people gathered at Mount Airy Museum of Regional History.

In contrast, those who weren't around when the civil rights icon was assassinated in 1968 seemingly can identify with him only through old film clips or staticky recordings of his historic speeches.

However, local young people have a greater link to King than they might think, Scott and other speakers at the 11th-annual MLK tribute said. This includes realizing his "dream" without possibly knowing it by engaging in community service and otherwise working for a better world, which Dr. King would be proud of if alive today.

Saturday night's event — which museum officials said drew the largest MLK program attendance ever — served to help bridge the gap by recognizing the importance of young people in perpetuating the lessons he espoused.

"This year we are focusing on our youth," explained LaDonna McCarther, who helped organize the annual museum program along with Scott and other volunteers. "We thought it was time to recognize our young people."

This was accomplished by singling out certain youths for their contributions, such as one who tirelessly volunteers every year during a community Thanksgiving meal at First Baptist Church. Young people also played an active role in Saturday's program by performing song and dance selections.

The multi-racial event additionally featured several soloists — such as Tracy Greenwood, Tony Searcy and Elizabeth Martin — and prayer, poetry and scripture reading.

At one point, a "Let Freedom Ring" responsive reading was held in which audience members were given small bells to jingle at certain intervals. In doing so, they joined others at more than 300 known locations in paying homage to King's directive to let freedom ring during his "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963.

Other highlights Saturday night were candle-lighting ceremonies and an audience singing of "Amazing Grace" to end the program.

"Torch Bearer"

Sandwiched between the various activities, the lessons of Martin Luther King Jr. took center stage at the museum, including constant reminders to never forget the truly remarkable place he holds in American history.

"Martin…became the spokesperson — he became the torch bearer," Scott said of the civil rights movement.

Audience members were reminded that King did so at a time when standing up for equality wasn't popular, during a turbulent period of segregation when African-Americans were banned from certain restaurants and endured other racist acts.

"It was just really a rough time in our history — but everybody persevered," Scott said. "That's what I want you young people to remember."

The sacrifices King made for his cause in seeking educational and economic opportunity for all can't be underestimated, Scott continued.

King's home was bombed and he received numerous threats as he toured racial hot spots around the country, leading to his eventual slaying in Memphis.

Yet during his brief lifetime the civil rights leader chose to battle foes with love that emanated from a deep religious faith. He once admitted that it was difficult to like someone seeking to harm his family, "but Jesus says love them," Scott related.

"I don't think there is any way he could have taken this on if he did not have a strong belief in God."

This was evident until the time King was killed, Scott told the audience, including remarking in a speech the night before his assassination that "I've seen too much hate to want to hate myself."

The spirit of Saturday night's tribute to Dr. King and others who fought and died to achieve equality also was captured in a prayer by minister Kathy Dobson.

"We thank you for the one we are honoring," Dobson said, "for the legacy our forefathers have left for us to celebrate and to enjoy."

The minister said she hopes to one day encounter King in heaven and hear him assess the job others have done to carry on the dream with two simple words: "Well-done."