Martin Luther King III greeted Monica Wilkerson last night at Indiana University Southeast before speaking on the New Albany campus.

King says father's dream lives on

6-6-98

By GREG FIELDS
The Courier-Journal

Looking much like his father and now continuing his mission, Martin Luther King III believes the fight to promote racial harmony and to create economic empowerment did not die with the civil-rights crusader.

In a visit to Louisville and New Albany, Ind., yesterday, King said he wants to carry on the legacy as president of the organization the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. co-founded, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, based in Atlanta.

"My father always talked about the triple evils: racism, poverty and violence," King said. "These issues should be dying. But they are strangely still in our midst."

King came to recognize the Floyd County (Ind.) Prosecutor's Office alternative sentencing program, which received the SCLC's Humanitarian Award in 1996. He also toured the area and met with local civil-rights activists and elected officials.

The prosecutor's program is designed to help first-time non-violent offenders stay out of jail and find employment. It combines social worker planning and oversight with community service, drug and alcohol counseling and other help traditionally available to first-time offenders.

"This program can help minimize the rate that poor men and women and black men and women are getting caught up in the system," King said.

He also commended Floyd County Prosecutor Stan Faith and Sister Mary Marcotte, a social worker who directs the program, for their involvement.

"I don't think anyone likes to put people in jail all the time," Faith said. "We think we can turn these people around, before it's too late."

Though the younger King doesn't possess his father's booming voice, he has his eyes, which filled with passion as he spoke of the Rev. King's legacy.

"He changed this nation without using a gun, rock or brick," King said of his father's influence on America's political and social landscape. "He articulated a message of love."

Many people still consider the Rev. King's assassin, James Earl Ray — who recently died of liver failure — to have been a coward who destroyed that message of love King does not.

"When my family mourned the death of James Earl Ray we mourned the death of an innocent man," King said.

He and his family are asking Attorney General Janet Reno to launch an investigation into Ray's conviction Ray recanted shortly after he admitted that he shot King in 1968

King talked in an interview about opposition to renaming a New Albany street for his father. The idea was opposed by Floyd County residents and some City Council members.

"I'm not surprised with the climate the way it is," King said. "This is the age of hate-talk radio and anti-affirmative-action views. We're still living in a very sick nation."

New Albany Mayor Doug England, who initiated the name change last year, also reflected on problems the issues created among city residents.

"Almost every major city in every state has something dedicated to (King), but not in New Albany," England said. "It's a little embarrassing."

England said he wants the city to revisit the issue of renaming the City Council Building after King, especially since it was the site of Indiana's second African-American school.

King, who spoke at Jay's Cafeteria in Louisville in the afternoon, also addressed 450 people attending the Floyd-Clark County chapter's SCLC banquet at Indiana University Southeast. King said he "never envisioned being president of an organization my father was so involved in. It's a tremendous honor."