

## Honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

# For Many US Towns and Cities, Deciding Which Streets to Name After MLK Reflects His Unfinished Work

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*The Conversation*

**M**ore than 1,000 streets in the world bear the name of slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.

At least 955 of those streets can be found in the U.S. They're in 41 states, the District of Co-

lumbia and Puerto Rico. Martin Luther King streets cross a diversity of neighborhoods – rural and urban, residential and commercial, large and small. The range of these named streets across the country makes it seem that remembering and memorializing King was inevitable.

Yet, for some communities, the drive to name public spaces in King's name has taken years as well as heated debates, boycotts, petition drives, marches and even litigation.

My research over the past 20 years has examined the role of African Americans in the King street-naming process.

I have found that the nation's Martin Luther King streets – while seen by some as celebrating the victories of a movement that left racism safely in the past – are one terrain on which a continuing struggle for civil rights has played out.

**It started in Chicago**  
The geographic

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range of King streets reflects the influence of King's work. It also reflects the cultural and political power of African-Americans, who are largely responsible for bringing street renaming proposals before local city councils and county commissions.

Just months after King's assassination in 1968, Chicago became the first city to rename a street for King. Alderman Leon Despres, a White liberal and King supporter, initially proposed renaming a street in the city's central business district. However, Mayor Richard J. Daley followed with a different resolution. He wanted to place King's name on South Park Way, a road more than 11 miles long that runs strictly through African-American communities on Chicago's South Side.

Daley was no fan of King and infamous for his shoot-to-kill order against rioters after the civil right leader's murder. When King came to Chicago in 1966 to challenge segregated housing, he encountered great hatred from taunting and violent white crowds.

According to journalists Adam Cohen and Elizabeth Taylor, in their book “American Pharaoh,” Mayor Daley was seeking to mend his and the city's public image in the lead up to the 1968 Democratic National Convention. Indeed, he held the street renaming dedication ceremony a week before the convention. At the same time, the mayor didn't want to alienate his political base of racially hostile whites.

Two Black city aldermen objected to Daley's proposal. One of them, Alderman A.A. “Sammy” Rayner, called the street renaming “tokenism” and called on city leaders to do “something bigger.” He and William Cousins Jr. suggested renaming a proposed Crosstown Expressway. It was planned to cut across, and unite, different parts of Chicago. But the City Council eventually approved the

mayor's plan to rename South Park Way as Dr. Martin Luther King Drive, which it remains today.

Even now, 50 years later, proponents still must fight to convince many municipal officials that King's name belongs on major roads.

**More than just a name**  
Many of the activists with whom I have spoken view King streets as a way to carry on King's unfinished work to create racial equality and economic justice in the U.S.

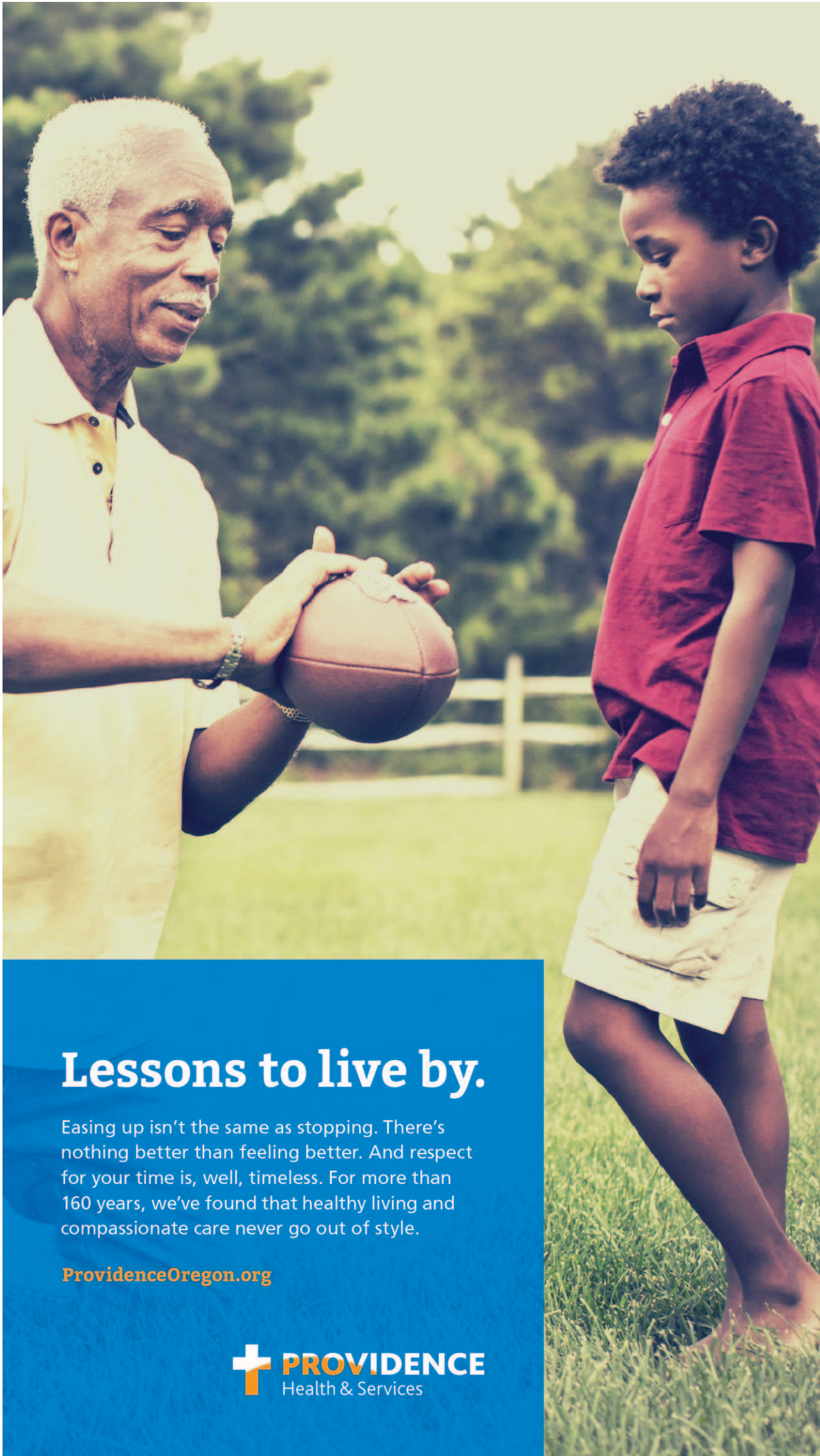
Greater visibility, they argue, can communicate the legitimacy of King's message. More streets named after the civil rights leader, especially in prominent parts of town, can help educate a wider white public of the relevance and resonance of civil rights and black historical contributions.

Some cities honor King with important thoroughfares that connect a variety of neighborhoods. These include Albuquerque, Austin, New Bern in North Carolina, Oakland-North Berkeley, Savannah and Tampa.

However, public opposition over the past half century has led most cities to rename smaller streets or portions of roads located entirely within poor African-American neighborhoods. Opponents tend to be White business and property owners on affected roads. In public, most cite concerns over cost and inconvenience. Some suggest the association with King's name will stigmatize their neighborhood.

For example, when a Chattanooga real estate developer faced the prospect of his new development on West Ninth Street being named for King, he expressed concern about renting offices to potential clients because a MLK address, in his words, would create “racial overtones.” Suggesting King's name was out of place on the road, he said: “West Ninth Street is not related to Dr.

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