

## BLOG

### MARTIN LUTHER KING DAY OF SERVICE

# CONNECTING ATLANTA VOLUNTEERS WITH OPPORTUNITIES TO ‘DO SOMETHING GOOD,’ ON MLK DAY AND BEYOND

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By *Kay Nolan*



***“Everybody can be great, because everybody can serve. ... You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love.” – Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.***

Each year on the third Monday in January, friends, family, coworkers and neighbors come together in communities across the nation to honor the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. through acts of service. The largest national day of service, MLK Day is an opportunity for all of us to reflect on gains won during the Civil Rights Movement and to address contemporary issues facing our nation through meaningful civic dialogue and community volunteerism.

At [Hands On Atlanta](#), a Points of Light affiliate, it is also an opportunity to celebrate Dr. King in the city where he was born and raised. Founded nearly 30 years ago, in 1989, Hands On Atlanta’s mission is to “tackle greater Atlanta’s most pressing needs by igniting a passion for service and creating life-long

community volunteers.” Engaging volunteers year-round in programs focused on youth and families, education, hunger and homelessness, their work breathes new life into Dr. King’s vision of neighbors working together for the betterment of their communities, and our world.

“We’re the volunteer hub for the city of Atlanta,” said Tim Adkins, director of marketing and communications at Hands On Atlanta. “Like most other affiliates in the Points of Light Network, our job is to connect changemakers – you know, volunteers – to nonprofits and schools in need. We engage about 20,000 volunteers every year, over the course of 150,000 service hours with projects that we have [listed on our website](#) every day.”

Although Hands On Atlanta coordinates volunteer projects year-round, encouraging residents to “Do Something Good,” its [Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Service events](#) especially resonate with the city’s residents.



This year will mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dr. King’s assassination, which occurred April 4, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee. At the time, he was focused on a project he called the Poor People’s Campaign, which sought to address income inequality. To mark the anniversary, this year Hands On Atlanta partnered with [The King Center](#) and committed to “50 Acts of Service” – 30 projects to be done on the MLK Day holiday, and 20 more to be completed between January and April.

“Dr. King’s commitment to service and helping others is at the core of our work. Like Dr. King, we also believe that, ‘everyone can be great, because anyone can serve.’ As the needs for Atlanta continue to grow, the demand for volunteers is greater than ever, and it’s our job to connect our network of volunteers to our nonprofit partners and schools who need their help,” said Tim. “Going big for MLK Day is a way for us to honor Dr. King’s legacy while showcasing the work with do 365 days a year.”

At parks and schools, nature preserves and underserved neighborhoods, hundreds of volunteers built benches, planted gardens, maintained trails, painted and beautified communal spaces. Still others volunteered at food pantries and community outreach organizations, organizing donations, assembling lunches for school children, boxing and delivering meals to seniors – and so much more. In total, Hands On Atlanta engaged more than 1,800 volunteers, who gave nearly 5,000 hours of their time on MLK Day.

Longtime volunteer Donnis Davis sorted and distributed food to pre-screened families in need.

"The coolest thing about it is the church where the food distribution program is held was once led by Ralph David Abernathy (a close colleague of Martin Luther King)," said Donnis. Dr. King had visited West Hunter Street Baptist Church, he said, and the congregation is proud to be affiliated with Ralph Abernathy.

Donnis, a finance manager for a local car dealership, has volunteered with Hands On Atlanta for 20 years, doing everything from painting houses and schools to packaging and distributing food, to planting gardens and doing landscaping.

This year, as part of Hands On Atlanta's Civic Leadership Program, Donnis is committed to a yearlong partnership with Southwest Ecumenical Emergency Assistance Center, a group of churches that addresses hunger, unemployment and health. It offers a monthly food distribution program, a weekly food pantry and regular classes in job interviewing skills. A clothing closet provides business attire for people who can't afford to buy a new outfit for an interview.

For Donnis, whose large family has always been active in church in community, volunteering gives him the "chance to do something positive with so negative stuff going on in the world."

"It's basically like therapy," said Davis, who adds that volunteering has helped him improve his organizational and communication skills. "It's made me more open-minded and empathetic."



### Sunday Suppers

A newer initiative of Hands On Atlanta is the Signature Sunday Supper event. Since 2015, corporate and community leaders have gathered for dinner on the Sunday before the King Holiday. Speakers lead discussion about topics pertinent to Dr. King's mission – acknowledging that many of these problems continue to exist today.

"We want to have an open and honest conversation about possible solutions," said Tim. "Hands On Atlanta wants to be able to lead those conversations."

[Sunday Supper](#), a Points of Light program, is inspired by Dr. King's vision that people of diverse backgrounds would come together to discuss injustices of the day and create a plan for action. The

events, which can be hosted by organizations and individuals alike, call people to share a meal and engage in dialogue about issues affecting their communities.

This year, about 250 people attended the Hands On Atlanta Signature Sunday Supper at The Gathering Spot. Speakers included Nathaniel Smith, founder and CEO of the Partnership for Southern Equity; Dedrick Asante-Muhammad, senior fellow, racial wealth divide, with Prosperity Now; Natalye Paquin, CEO of Points of Light; and Lori George Billingsley, vice president of community relations at Coca-Cola North America. Cheryl Preheim, evening anchor with 11Alive news, was the emcee. The livestream of the event, which was shared on Facebook, received more than 50,000 views nationwide – from Atlanta, to Tacoma, Washington, to Chicago and New Jersey.

In addition, individuals throughout Atlanta were invited to host their own Sunday Suppers, in conjunction with Civic Dinners, an organization that provides a template for discussion topics. Hosts were urged to invite guests with different points of view.

Rachel Sprecher was excited to host a Sunday Supper, along with her husband and three other couples in their late 20s or early 30s.

"I think it's great, and something we probably don't do enough of – get together with like-minded, action-oriented peers to talk about issues," said Rachel. "I really like the idea of having 50 of them, celebrating the legacy of Dr. King. I like that at the same time, on the same night, this will be happening all over Atlanta."

Rachel also works with Hands On Atlanta through her job with Atlanta Public Schools, where she is executive director in the district's office of partnerships and development. "Hands On Atlanta recruits volunteers to do projects at our schools," she explained. "They do beautification projects; they do Saturday programming for our students, help with tutoring and mentoring – pretty much anything we need, they step up and volunteer."



With MLK Day behind them, the team at Hands On Atlanta looks forward to doing more good in 2018. Their year-round programming focuses on the impact areas of youth development, family support and self-sufficiency, and education – 75% of all volunteer opportunities available through Hands On Atlanta focus on education and youth hunger. [Discovery](#), a popular "Saturday School" program, provides tutoring and homework help, STEM enrichment, health and wellness activities, and more. Building on

the success of the initiative, the organization has developed programming to give parents the tools and resources for their kids to be successful, including the [Meals4Kids](#) program that provides weekend backpacks filled with food. And this year, says Tim, Hands On Atlanta will launch a new “at work” program for employers to engage their employees in the parenting skills needed to ensure their children are developing literacy skills.