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By BEN NUCKOLS

Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) -- Visitors got their first up-close look Monday at the memorial to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., including a towering granite sculpture inspired by the civil rights leader's “I Have a Dream" speech.

The site opened without fanfare around 11 a.m. to kick off a week of celebrations ahead of Sunday's official dedication. A few hundred people had lined up outside the site by late morning on what was a warm and sunny day in the nation's capital. A stream of people filed into the site, reading some of the 14 quotations from King's speeches inscribed into a 450-foot-long granite

wall.

The memorial sits on the National Mall near the Tidal Basin, between memorials honoring Presidents Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson. The sheer size of the 30-foot sculpture of King sets it apart from the nearby statues of Jefferson and Lincoln, which are both about 20 feet tall.

Pamela M. Cross, 53, a cybersecurity professional from Washington, said she usually passes by the memorial on her morning walk around the National Mall and was excited to be able to see it up close.

Cross said her father, a postal worker, attended the march on Washington in 1963. She said King's message continues to resonate.

“The way the country is right now, it's good to remember his principles," Cross said. “We are in need of jobs, we're in need of equality, we're in need of an economic vision that's inclusive."

The sculptor, Lei Yixin, said he wanted the memorial to be a visual representation of the ideals King spoke of in his “I Have a Dream" speech.

“His dream is very universal. It's a dream of equality," Lei said through his son, who translated from Mandarin. “He went to jail. He had been beaten, and he sacrificed his life for his dream. And now his dream comes true."

Jean Watkins, 67, a neurodiagnostic technologist from Washington, said she was active in the civil rights movement in her native Norfolk, Va. She said the memorial caused her to reflect on the country's progress, noting that her granddaughter is about to begin her freshman year at Stanford University.

“Had he not done what he did, those doors would not be open for her and all of us," Watkins

said.

Scott Lunt, 42, a freelance video producer, brought his 15-month-old son, Oliver, along for what he called a “momentous day."

“I hope that my son can grow up in a world where race is less important than it is in my life," Lunt said.

The sculpture depicts King with a stern expression, wearing a jacket and tie, his arms folded and clutching papers in his left hand. Lei said through his son that “you can see the hope" in King's face, but that his serious demeanor also indicates that “he's thinking."

The statue depicts King emerging from a stone. The concept for the memorial was taken from a line in the “I Have a Dream" speech, which is carved into the stone: “Out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope." Visitors to the memorial pass through a sculpture of the mountain of despair and come upon the stone of hope.

The National Mall site will be surrounded with cherry trees that will blossom in pink and white in the spring.

Sunday's dedication ceremony will mark the 48th anniversary of the March on Washington and King's famous “I Have a Dream" speech. President Barack Obama is scheduled to speak at the dedication.