

Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community?  
MLK Celebration Breakfast  
Austin College  
January 18, 2016

Good morning.

Thank Marjorie for the kind invitation,

Thank Dr. Lynn Womble for all of her help with the logistics.

Thank Dr. Martinella Dryburgh for the being my campus host.

As you have just heard, I am a recovering attorney. Practicing law was my original career choice. I became a lawyer because of Thurgood Marshall and Charles Hamilton Houston. By any standard and in any era, these were brilliant men. Marshall, who before he became the country's first African American Supreme Court justice, graduated

number 1 in his class at Howard University's Law School and won 83% of his cases before the Supreme Court. Houston, in addition to being Marshall's professor, was the Dean of Howard's Law School, and Special Counsel for the NAACP, graduated in 1911 as the valedictorian of his class at Amherst College and went on to become a member of the Law Review and graduate with honors from Harvard Law School.

As a young boy, I was fascinated by how these men used the law to facilitate social change. Their strategy for using the courts to defeat Jim Crow inspired and amazed me. As I grew older, I embraced the law not because of my desire to become a Supreme Court justice, but rather because I wanted to use the institution of the law to right society's wrongs and to become an advocate for the voiceless and the disenfranchised.

It is about using our institutions and our collective voices for the common good that I would like to visit with you about today. The question that I would like to pose to this august body for us to ponder for our short time together is simply this: “When will there be justice for all?”

Typically, on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday people will focus on the “I Have a Dream” version of him. Well, this is not that speech. Instead, I want to talk about the “Poor People’s Campaign” version of Dr. King. This version of King had shifted his focus from race to poverty. This is Dr. King near the end of his life. It is this Dr. King who would be gravely, concerned, and if we are honest, deeply disappointed in us as a country.

If Dr. King were alive today, he would see an America where:

1. The poverty rate for children under age 18 is 21.1 percent.
2. 23.5 million people live in food deserts.
3. More than 600,000 people in Chicago live in food deserts; 20% of San Francisco's population forsakes buying food in order to pay their bills; and as many as 3m New Yorkers live in communities without enough access to full-service grocery stores.

In a country with such wealth and affluence, how can this be possible? In a room with some of the most intelligent and caring people in the country, how can this be just? To quote Dr. King,

“All too many of those who live in affluent America ignore those who exist in poor America. To ignore this evil is to become an accomplice to it.”

Now, let me be clear. I am not calling any of you evil. Rather, I am pointing out the evil that lurks among us. It is the evil of myopia. It is the evil of complacency.

The statistics that I shared stand in deep conflict with our finely honed senses of justice. It is this sense of justice that leads lawyers and other concerned citizens to tackle some of the most pervasive problems of our society.

One of these pervasive problems is addressing the inadequacies of our nation's (and this city's) public schools. The problem with our efforts to ensure a quality education for all children is that they do not tackle the real problem.

The current school of thought is that we can fix our public school systems by concentrating on improving the quality of teachers, principals, and

trustees. I think having all of those individuals in place is nice. However, if we give our young people an “A” teacher, principal, and trustee, but send them home each night to an “F” life, we have only created “D” students. If we want to fix our schools, I submit to you that we must first address the poverty in our communities.

Do you want to know what growing up in long-term poverty does to children? It does more than impede their cognitive ability, school achievement, and emotional and behavioral outcomes. Growing up in long-term poverty amidst such ostentatious displays of wealth breaks a child’s spirit and crushes their ability to dream. A child without dreams grows into an adult without hope. There is nothing scarier than an adult without hope for a better future. Our jails are full of such people.

It is into this breach that we, at Paul Quinn College, have decided to venture. We believe, to use the words of Dr. King that:

“An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.”

Furthermore, we “have the audacity to believe that people everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality, and freedom for their spirits.”

Here is what that looks like in the Quinnite Nation:

1. When people told us that our land was worthless and no one seemed interested in helping us end the food desert in our

neighborhood, we transformed our football field into a two-acre organic farm and began feeding people ourselves. People sometimes ask me why I hate football so much. I don't hate football. I just hate people not having access to healthy food more than I like football.

2. When our students could not afford the \$23,850 price tag, we cut tuition, fees, room, & board to \$14,275 by determining how much money we actually needed to run the institution and then passed the savings along to the students. Now, the average Paul Quinn College student can graduate from college with approximately \$9,000 in student loans.

3. When we discovered that our students were working part-time jobs that compromised their academic performance and left them woefully underprepared for high-paying careers, we



created a new model of urban higher education. We are the first urban work college in the US. At our school, everyone who lives on campus works 10-20 hrs. per week. It also allows us to make sure every student graduates with four years of real world work experience and relationships. This isn't about hand outs; this is about a hand pulling people who are willing to work, up.

My point in sharing all of this with you is not to brag or boast. Rather it is simply to show you what is possible when people decide that enough is enough. If we can do it, anyone can do it. We are not a rich school, nor do we have a history of broad community engagement. We just realized one day that there were no Buffalo Soldiers coming to rescue us. We had to be the ones we were waiting for.

There is so much passion for justice in this room. There are so many people whose hearts are in the right places and make tremendous sacrifices daily for the common good. But how can any of us comfortably sit here in a country where typically just minutes away from the splendor of affluence are food deserts, homeless families, and children without hope? How is this the best that we can do? How is this just?

The time has come for us to ban together and show this country what is possible when people who have love in their hearts and justice in their souls stand up for the voiceless among us.

That looks like:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

As I take my seat, I will leave you with these final words by the great Nelson Mandela:

“Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is the protection of a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life . . . .”

-- [Nelson Mandela](#)

Thank you, and I hope all of you will join the Quinnite Nation in our quest for community over chaos.