

Good morning and Thank you Teresa for the introduction. I would also like to extend special thank yous' to the Event Planning Committee, Grayson County Rotary Club, the Sherman Rotary Club, and to my sister Malinda Bender for joining us today. I am honored to be here to speak with you about the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It is my hope that I will not bore you and that I will be able to offer you a different perspective on the legacy of Dr. King. The title of my talk this morning is "To Be Young, Gifted, and Black: The Liberal Arts Education of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr."

While attending the Little Zion AME church in Lavaca, Alabama as a young child, my first introduction to Dr. King was through a hand fan that displayed an iconic photo of him delivering a sermon. This hand fan was used by members of the church to wave back and forward to generate a breeze of cool air during the blistering summer months. And often times, this hand fan was also used as a symbolic gesture that accompanied the shouts of "AMEN" and "PREACH" amongst the congregation as the audience acknowledged their connection to the message that was being delivered by the pastor. Looking back through my years as a young child and teenager, the imagery of Dr. King always appeared during his federal holiday and throughout Black History month. It was not until I attended college that I was able to grasp a deeper understanding of his leadership and his legacy.

Rather than spending time to discuss his legacy which I'm sure you all have read about or even seen documentaries on such, I want to focus specifically on his liberal arts education at Morehouse College and its impact on his leadership and life. During the first semester of my junior year at Vassar College I was afforded an opportunity to do a domestic exchange program at Morehouse College. My semester at Morehouse not only had a huge impact upon my life, but it also allowed me to be in the same spaces as Dr. King and experience the profound joy of being a Black Male at an institution founded exclusively to educate and develop black men through a liberal arts curriculum and brotherhood.

As a teenager, Dr. King was incredibly intelligent. He skipped his first and final year at the Booker T. Washington High School in Atlanta, GA and was accepted to attend Morehouse College. During this timeframe in the United States, only less than 1% of black men earned a

college degree. Also, during this same period of time, many young black men who were enrolled at colleges were being enlisted for World War II. As a result, Morehouse College experienced an enrollment decline and decided to allow juniors in high school the opportunity to apply if they passed the college's entrance exam. Dr. King passed that entrance exam and enrolled at Morehouse as a 15-year-old freshmen. But before his fall enrollment, Dr. King along with other Morehouse students had to work at a tobacco farm in Connecticut to pay for their education costs. This was the first time in Dr. King's life that he left the segregated South and traveled to the integrated North. He and the other students were amazed that they could go into fine restaurants, theaters, and even church alongside white people. This experience had a transformative impact upon Dr. King as he had felt resentment against whites due to his traumatized experiences throughout his adolescence years.

In September of 1944 during his freshmen year, Dr. King was introduced to Dr. Benjamin E. Mays who served as Morehouse President. During Dr. Mays's Tuesday morning lectures to the student body, he stressed intellectual excellence, religious piety, and commitment to racial advancement. Unfortunately, during his earlier semesters at Morehouse, historians note that Dr. King was not seriously interested in his academics although he enjoyed attending and debating during Dr. Mays Tuesday morning lectures. Instead, Dr. King enjoyed the social life of college more so than the coursework. As he continued to live at home with his parents while attending Morehouse, Dr. King's male friends recalled times that he would take them and girls to his house to party while his dad was at church. I'm sure a few of you in the audience or on the live stream can recall attending parties during your college days and disregarding your academic coursework. Please don't feel guilty because I too was one of those students. Like many of our college students of today, Dr. King was heavily involved in student organizations and activities such as the debate team, student council, glee club, sociology club and the minister's club. He also participated in the NAACP and played on the Butler Street YMCA basketball team. It was no surprise for me to learn that Dr. King earned average course grades and only one "A" in his four years at Morehouse given the depth of his involvement outside of the classroom.

Classmates of Dr. King admired his oratorical skills recalling that "he knew almost intuitively how to move an audience." Dr. King participated in two John L. Webb oratorical competitions

on campus and he won second prize each time. Given that both his father and grandfather were Baptist preachers and alumni of Morehouse, public speaking was a natural gift he had been given. After Dr. King's first two years at the college, he became increasingly an active voice in addressing the social and political issues that were occurring. During his junior year, he wrote an editorial in the Atlanta Constitution as a response to recent murders in Georgia demanding that Blacks are entitled to the basic rights such as "equal opportunities in education, the right to vote, and equality." This is one of the earlier moments that we see Dr. King as a student activist. In that same academic year, he also penned an article in the college's newspaper on the purpose of education. Dr. King stated to his fellow classmates that "the function of education is teach one to think intensively and to think critically." He went on to state that "we must remember that intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education." If colleges failed at this goal, Dr. King believed that they would "produce a group of close-minded, unscientific, illogical propagandist, consumed with immoral acts." Towards the end of this same academic year Dr. King realized the career he had fought against for years was the one he would ultimately embark on. Dr. King's father always wanted him to follow his footsteps to become a Baptist minister but Dr. King initially rejected that desired path. Instead, he wanted to become a lawyer or even a physician. Dr. King believed that religious practices appealed to the emotions of individuals instead of their intellect. After developing a close relationship with Dr. Mays who also was a minister, Dr. King began to see liberalism as a catalyst for religion. In addition to Dr. Mays's mentorship, Dr. King also developed a close relationship with two faculty members, Dr. Walter Chivers, a sociologist, and Dr. George Kelsey, a theologian. Both Dr. Chivers and Dr. Kelsey, helped Dr. King to realize that his passion involved both social activism and religion. Dr. King shared with his family that he "came to see that God had placed a responsibility upon his shoulders and the more he tried to escape it, the more frustrated he would become." Dr. King later delivered his first sermon at Ebenezer Baptist Church and immediately after his sermon, the congregation licensed him to preach and he became the Associate Pastor to his father.

During his senior year Morehouse College, Dr. King joined the Intercollegiate Council at Emory University which was an interracial student organization that met monthly to address social change. Also, within his senior year, Dr. King was ordained as a minister at Ebenezer. After

graduating Morehouse with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology, Dr. King went on to attend the Crozer Theological Seminary and Boston University where he earned a PhD in Theology.

Looking back at his years at Morehouse College, it is clear that the liberal arts had a huge impact on the shaping of his leadership and his life. I must admit, that I'm very biased because I'm the product of a liberal arts education. I have spent most of my administrative years in higher education working at liberal arts colleges, and it is an OBLIGATION that I make the following statement. For those of you who didn't have the privilege to attend a liberal arts college, I want to take this time to share with you that Not Only are they the best colleges in the world, but they are known for educating the *Whole* person to lead *Meaningful* and *Considered* lives. Here at Austin College, President O'Day shares with everyone, that we are in the business of transforming students lives so that they can transform the world. Morehouse College exposed a 15-year-old Martin Luther King, Jr. to mentorship from a President and faculty members, the ability to think critically, the ability to develop his leadership through exercising civic engagement, and character development aligned with a moral compass. Morehouse College transformed his life and Dr. King would ultimately transform the world.

During his activism and organizational leadership, we are all aware of the Montgomery bus boycott, countless sit-ins, Dr. King being jailed, the Birmingham campaign against racial segregation & economic injustice, the March on Washington, and the Selma voting rights movement. We are even aware of Dr. King winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. But for me, his most memorable action was written in his Letter from the Birmingham Jail in which he states the following:

“I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Councilor or the Klu Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to “order” than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: “I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action”;

who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who live by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." This passage was recently reflected upon this past Saturday by Dr. Victor Ray, Associate Professor of Sociology, Criminology, and African American studies at the University of Iowa in his CNN opinion commentary regarding the current failure to pass a universal voting rights legislation.

And So, my challenge to you today is two-fold. I ask that each of you invest in and support liberal art colleges such as Austin College as we provide students with a transformative educational experience that will teach them to be lifelong learners and global citizens. If Dr. King was with us here today, he would say to students such as Clemon, to pursue your passions through education so that you can solve the problems of our society and create change that will positively influence the lives of everyone you encounter. He would challenge our faculty to continue their mentorship of students while encouraging their students to take intellectual risks as they reason and analyze through their creativity and generation of ideas. He would challenge staff to create campus communities where everyone has a strong sense of belongingness and to ensure that equity is the foundation in all that we do. And he would say to administrators such as myself and President O'Day, that having a student body where students from diverse backgrounds and cultures represent the *MAJORITY* is a great compliment to his dream but there is still much work to be done. In a country plagued with political divisiveness during a global pandemic, Dr. King would not want us sit idle, but rather lead with greater purpose and to impart urgency in our students, faculty and staff to encounter our challenges of today head on and to continue our fight to end systematic racism and inequities as they have created issues of justice and access across minority communities. Dr. King would also encourage all others in the audience and even those of you who are watching us live stream to remember that as a community and nation, we are fair greater being united and together as a people rather than living in restraints confined to our political and/or religious ideologies. Dr. King shared his dream with our nation and the world on August 28, 1963. 59 years later as a society, we have made much progress to date, but I ask each of us to look into our inner selves and ask,

What have I contributed in creating a community and world that is inclusive and equity minded? What have I done to eliminate barriers to access? What have I done to challenge the injustices of today? And what have I done through my citizenship that supports and affirms that “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

Only you know the answer to these questions and it is my hope that each of you will continue to live your life through purpose with love and grace towards all human beings. As I come to a close, I would like to take this moment to share lyrics from Nina Simone’s song “To Be Young, Gifted and Black” as a homage to Dr. King’s collegiate years at Morehouse College.

“To be young, gifted and black.
Oh, what a lovely precious dream.
To be young, gifted and black.
Open your heart to what I mean.
In the whole world you know.
There are a billion boys and girls.
Who are young, gifted and black.
And that’s a fact!
Young, gifted and black.
We must begin to tell our young
There’s a world waiting for you
This is a quest that’s just begun
When you feel really low
Yeah, there’s a great truth you should know
When you’re young, gifted and black
Your soul’s intact!
Young, gifted and black

How I long to know the truth
There are times when I look back
And I am haunted by my youth
Oh, but my joy of today
Is that we can all be proud to say
To be young, gifted and black
Is where it's at!

Dr. King, we commemorate you today and honor the impact that a liberal arts education had upon your life and the way it shaped not only social movements of yesterday and today, but also helped to transform the world. THANK YOU.