

Good Morning: Let me begin first thanking Dr. Carlos Lassiter, Heidi Childs & the team of student assistants responsible for hosting this event. I've attended several of these events over the 30+ years I've lived in the Sherman community, & I must say, that being asked to be the speaker for this event was an unexpected honor & privilege.

We don't worship Dr. King today, but we do acknowledge the impact of his leadership on our nation & around the world. What we do here today continues the conversation for the never ending quest for freedom. I want each of us to consider our participation in this event as an act of continuing education. We continue our education by laying aside our many differences & aspiring to find common ground with each other. Thank you for coming out to support this event.

The legacy Dr. King established during his lifetime is solidly in place. I'm not going to add new insights to his legacy; however, I do want to raise in each of us an awakened awareness that the journey for freedom in America is not complete. I have two key thoughts I want each of us to contemplate today. Never Give Up...Continue The Journey. As a teenager growing up in Rockdale Texas, I struggled with the concept of fully applying myself to academic pursuits. Like many small towns in Texas, young African American boys yearned to be sports stars. I too got caught up in that mindset. My mother (Herself a lifetime high school educator) observed the change in my focus, & took the opportunity to tell me a story that changed my perspective about education. She told me about my Maternal Grandfather (whom we affectionately called Grandpa Aaron). Grandpa Aaron dropped out of the 8th grade at 12 years old to care for his mother (Dying from terminal Cancer), because none of his other siblings could/would shoulder the responsibility. From the age of 12 until the age of 22 Grandpa Aaron performed all needed care duties for his mother (cooking, cleaning, diapering, clothes washing, spoon-feeding etc...). She died when Grandpa Aaron was 22 yrs old. At 22 yrs old, Grandpa Aaron went back to school & rejoined the 8th grade. He went on to graduate high School at the age of 26. He didn't stop there. He went on to Houston Tillotson College in Austin, Texas to earn his Bachelors degree. He continued on to earn his Masters Degree in education before returning to Marlin, Texas (Falls County) to serve as an itinerant country teacher & Baptist Preacher. I remember the feeling I had when my mother told me that story. My grandfather's dogged determination to educate himself & secure better opportunity for himself & his family, is a legacy that will always remain in my family circle. In the 1950's & 1960's America watched as that same spirit of determination was displayed by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.. He endured unconscionable hardships; hungry nights; a relentless schedule; brutal beatings; frequent incarcerations; unjustified name calling; being spat upon; called a "fool" by both blacks & whites in the south... Nevertheless, Dr. King never gave up the pursuit of his dream of freedom for all African American citizens. I believe that if Dr. King were here with us, he would instruct us not to dwell on the hardships he endured, but rather remember he never gave up as he continued the journey towards freedom.

Like my grandfather, Dr. King also demonstrated a relentless pursuit of education. Dr. King spoke a powerful statement I discovered during my preparation. Dr. King said "***I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality.***" His pursuit of unarmed truth led him to re-examine the words of our nation's founding documents (Declaration of Independence & Constitution Of The United States), & weaved his discoveries into his

ongoing narrative of freedom & equality for all Americans. Dr. King also possessed a high capacity for brotherly love. Another profound quote from Dr. King I discovered was “***Let no man pull you so low as to hate him.***” “***We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools***”. For a man who endured horrific treatment during his lifetime, it is amazing to hear him speak this kind of wisdom. Enduring hardship, while refraining from allowing hatred to consume his thinking, allowed Dr. King to stay focused on leading the drive towards freedom. In his pursuit of truth, Dr. King investigated the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. He became a student of Gandhi’s writings; educating himself on the tools & methods Gandhi employed in pursuing social & political change through non-violent methods & strategies. Dr. King engineered modifications to Gandhi’s techniques; changing the words & dialogue to align with his faith & commitment to the teachings of Jesus Christ. King then applied this strategy to the African American freedom movement. The result is now part of American Civil Rights history.

Let me see the hands of those who are current students here at Austin College. You have matriculated here from a variety of backgrounds, belief systems & cultures. Some of you enjoy the opportunity to study at Austin College because of the historical work of leaders like Dr. King. One such recipient of the benefits of equal access to higher education at Austin College is my own brother Dr. William Henry Petty (1982 Graduate of Austin College). Dr. King’s work to tear down walls of injustice & discrimination resulted in greater opportunities for all of us. For those of you who are students here at Austin College, your being here is a testament of your personal & your family’s high value for education. Some of you have invested thousands of dollars in this pursuit. Others have entered into debt to achieve educational goals. I’m 65 years old & now officially part of the older generation. I think I can speak for others in my generation in saying that we need you to be successful in achieving your educational goals. We need you to maintain the dogged determination that Grandpa Aaron & Dr. King demonstrated. We need you to continue to hold the banner of American Freedom high. America needs you to never give up & continue the freedom journey. My generation’s ability to effect change in this world is fading fast; therefore, I urge you to hold the torch of freedom high. Continue the journey for equal opportunity Dr. King & others demonstrated. America needs you to never give up & to continue the journey. There are yet still buildings to erect; laws to pass; construction plans to complete; history to record; roads to build; life-saving medicines to invent; scientific discoveries to make; great literature to write; legal issues to resolve; children to teach; new technology to apply; patients to treat; outer space to explore; surgeries to perform; a nation to govern & unfortunately wars to fight. None of these things will get accomplished unless everybody is free to pursue their dreams, & possess the education required to take on these tasks. We live in the greatest nation in the world. We owe it to those who have gone before us, & to those who follow after us, to do all in our power to keep this nation strong & free. We all owe a debt to Dr. King (& lesser-known heroes like Grandpa Aaron) for the leadership & sacrifices invested in the American Civil Rights movement. The nation has made great strides since the 1950’s & 1960’s, but the journey is not complete. Never Give Up...Continue The Journey. Each & every one of us can participate in the dream.

