

**Notre Dame Law School
Black Law Students Association
37th Annual BLSA Weekend
Stadium Press Box
on the Campus of The University of Notre Dame
April 10, 2010**

K E Y N O T E A D D R E S S

by

***The Honorable Kimberly M. Esmond Adams
Judge, Fulton County Superior Court
Atlanta Judicial Circuit***

Good Evening!

I am delighted to be with you on the occasion of this BLSA's 37th Annual Black Law Students Association Weekend. I want to commend BLSA's leadership for their commitment to maintaining a tradition that is vitally important to African-American law students and alumni here at Notre Dame. You see, I know it is not as easy as the weekend may appear. In fact, I distinctly remember an occasion during the late 90s when some of my classmates and I were beginning to question the utility of BLSA Weekend. But after a meeting between then-law students and concerned

alumni, including Judges Anne Williams, Roland Chamblee and Willie Lipscomb and others, we soon recognized that BLSA Weekend was worth preserving and went on in the Spring of 1998 to uphold this tradition in a way, I believe, made alumni proud. And just as they were proud of us back then, I want to say to you Madam President Anderson, your Executive Board and the entire BLSA membership who have worked tirelessly, I am certain, to pull this weekend together that we, too, are exceptionally proud of the work that you have done and continue to do to make this 37th BSLA Weekend a success. (Please join me in expressing our appreciation.)

To the new Dean of the Law School, Dean Newton, thank you for your commitment to BLSA and your appreciation for the value this organization adds to this Law School Community. I also am extremely appreciative that you took time out of what I am sure is an unrelenting schedule to be here this evening. I can tell you that your presence says more about your commitment to BLSA than any words you could ever utter.

To Professor Dwight King, thank you for your long-standing, unwavering commitment in your role as advisor to BLSA. We approached you back during that same period in the late 90s and solicited your support to formally serve as advisor, since you had served in an unofficial capacity for several years (perhaps even unbeknownst to you). You accepted our entreaty to serve and continue that exemplary service today. Thank you, Dwight.

I am certainly pleased that other BLSA alumni are here this evening. But I especially want to recognize my good friend and Notre Dame Law Classmate, Stephanie Gumm. Stephanie and her friend, Michael, traveled all the way from Louisville, KY to share with me this evening. You see, Stephanie, also is a BLSA alumnus. Stephanie joined BLSA during our law school days before we had non-African-American members. Stephanie joined BLSA not because she was Black nor because she wanted to be Black (as inviting as I am certain that prospect may have been). Rather, Stephanie joined BLSA, first and foremost, to

support her friends and also because she believed in the mission and purpose of this organization. My good friend is currently a partner in Baker Daniels' Intellectual Property Group in Indianapolis, IN. She has been with me for all of the significant events in my life since law school, including the death of family members, my wedding and my judicial swearing-in and she is here this evening to support me. Thank you for being here Stephanie. I want you to know publicly that I love and appreciate you and cherish our friendship. (Stephanie and Michael, please stand and be recognized.)

And to my King and Prince. My husband and I were planning a trip to Chicago this summer for my son before he went away to college. I was looking forward to strolling the Notre Dame campus with them to share why this place is so special to me. So, when I received the call about this honor, I knew it was providential (coupled, of course, with the fact that I was convinced everyone's favorite person in the Law School, Rebecca Ward, had hoodwinked and bamboozled BLSA into believing that I had somehow accomplished something

that merited this awesome honor!) But I digress. I am delighted my husband, (King) Michael, and my son, (Prince) Michael, are with me tonight. (Michael and Mikey, please stand and be recognized.)

Finally, as for the introduction, I probably enjoyed it more than I should have. But I do want to express my gratitude to President Anderson for her very kind words.

I am deeply humbled to have been selected as this year's recipient of the ***Alvin McKenna Distinguished Alumnus of the Year Award***. Aside from having had the personal privilege of meeting Mr. McKenna during my law school days, I know what this award means. And I must tell you that I certainly do not feel worthy of such a high recognition. But if I have been able to achieve some measure of success that the BLSA membership (with Rebecca's prodding) believes is worthy of this honor, then it is my honor and privilege to accept this award. And in accepting this award, I

accept it not just for myself, but for so many other extraordinary practitioners of law who set out to be a different kind of lawyer as did I when we were conferred law degrees from this spiritual place. I accept this award for my good friend, Dorphine Payne, who returned to law school at the tender age of 50 and tills the legal soil daily in Kalamazoo, MI representing adult and juvenile criminal defendants, fathers seeking custody of their children and others who might otherwise not have access to our legal system. I accept this award for my good friend, Timothy Howard, who has clerked for state and federal judges and worked as an Assistant Attorney General all while heeding his call to Christian ministry in Jackson, MS. And the list goes on and on. The point is, there is nothing extraordinary about who I am or what God has blessed me to be able to do. I am simply a vessel for the Lord's work. But I am thankful each and every day he chose me, and I am thankful that this evening BLSA did as well.

Reflecting on How Far We've Come, Inspired by How Far We Must Go

I must admit I was quite impressed with the theme chosen by this year's BLSA Weekend Planning Committee. While it is not unusual for a theme to involve both statements of retrospection (Reflecting on How Far We've Come) and introspection (Inspired by How Far We Must Go), I was moved by the selection of the word "Must" in the second statement in this year's theme. In other words, the theme did not conclude with some hopeful prospect for the future like, "Inspired By How Far We **Can** Go" or "Inspired By How Far We **Could** Go." Neither did the theme end with some general suggestion about what ought to happen like, "Inspired by How Far We **Should** Go." The word choice is clear. Inspired by How Far We **MUST** Go! This statement is not permissive but compels action with some sense of urgency. Inspired by How Far We **MUST** Go!

Moreover, the acknowledgment in the reflection of how far we have come suggests someone had an

appreciation for the labors of those who have gone before them. The truism that those who are ignorant of history are doomed to repeat it must have been echoing in the ears of the planners. And that, too, is significant because the statement also is an acceptance of the responsibility of each generation, each class, to do more than the last. And so now it is your time to Dream Big, Work Hard and Give Back! And I would like to take just a few moments to talk about the mandate to Dream Big, Work Hard and Give Back as you honor this year's theme, **“Reflecting on How Far We've Come, Inspired by How Far We Must Go!”**

We are in an unprecedented season in the legal context of this nation's history. We have a President barely in the second year of his first term poised to make his second appointment to this nation's highest court. There are vacancies for federal judges and United States Attorneys all over the country. Meanwhile, our burgeoning prison population and the lack of any meaningful, well-thought out offender re-entry programs means we are not prepared for the

release of the first wave of criminal defendants who will be completing mandatory prison sentences.

On the civil side, law firms are rescinding employment offers to Law Review Editors and those who graduated in the middle of their classes alike as they explore new and different ways to do business more efficiently and more economically. The new normal is requiring lawyers and recent law school graduates to be innovative in their business practices and employment prospects. Our profession as a whole from the silk stocking law firms to courts across the country is being commanded to do more with less. And while the economy has cast gloom over many a soon-to-be-graduates' excitement, all is not lost. My question for you this evening, BLSA members, is, what is YOUR dream? Put another way, why did you go to law school?

Do you aspire to be the top prosecutor in your home jurisdiction, a judge on the Supreme Court of your state or this nation, an advocate for the underserved and marginalized or a leading sports attorney and

agent? Do you want to use your legal training to open a clinic for victims of domestic violence or serve in the legislature in order to tackle issues like health care reform and immigration? What is your dream?

And the corollary to that question is, “From where do you draw your inspiration?” in the context of your theme’s mandate, “Inspired by How Far We Must Go.” Are you inspired by the public service of Judge Roland Chamblee, the ascension of Notre Dame’s own Judge Anne Claire Williams of the 7th Circuit Court of Appeals or the entrepreneurial gusto of ND Law Alumnus Maxx Siegel Who or whatever your inspiration, you ought to have a dream. And that dream should be so big and of such grandeur that it cannot be achieved without a sufficient expenditure of blood, sweat and tears.

My dream was that I would be a Supreme Court Justice, and more specifically, that The Honorable Justice Thurgood Marshall, my legal hero, would stick around until I was seasoned enough to replace him. In fact, when I was a child, I would always respond

unequivocally to the age-old “What do you want to be when you grow up?” question with “A JUDGE!” And I want to be clear, I never said a lawyer until after my mother convinced me when I was in junior high school that I had to be a lawyer before I could be a judge. You see, I had it all worked out. I was going to judge school and from judge school, straight to the nation’s capital to relieve my hero. The point is however misguided my unbridled ambition may have been, I DREAMED BIG. And in so doing, I positioned myself for election to the largest and busiest trial court in the State of Georgia in a major metropolitan city from among a field of seven (7) other candidates, all of whom had practiced longer than me. AND I WON in my first bid. And let me assure you, if I can do it -- that is, if I can see the realization of my dream, so too can you. So, I ask again, “What is YOUR dream?”

Next, in order to meet the challenges of our day, each of us must be prepared to work hard each and every day. There is no way around it. I do not care what your chosen practice area, hard work is a prerequisite. I often tell students from elementary school to law

school that excellence (which is the result of hard work) MUST be your standard. And let me be clear because I know that law school causes you to question your intellect, academic aptitude and audacity to believe you could graduate from law school. The excellence to which I refer extends far beyond “anonymous grading” and the classroom. It is found in your commitment to keep at it until the job is done and your commitment to give your very best effort in the process. Let me tell you that there are more than enough average people in the world and more than an ample supply of mediocre lawyers! Set your sights on excellence and work hard with an intentionality such that each step you take and each move you make in your life is a step closer to achieving your goals. Think of it as building your own professional enterprise in the same way that Jerry Krause built the Chicago Bulls dynasty. And while there certainly will be some detours along the way, continue to work hard and, I assure you, you will reap the rewards.

Indeed, when I learned that Michael Jackson and The Jacksons were not the only good things coming out of

Gary, IN, I could hardly contain myself. My heart filled with pride when I read that Notre Dame will graduate its first African-American Valedictorian. I am sure Katie Washington's journey to this institution's coveted top spot was not happenstance. There is no doubt in my mind that she worked hard every day to achieve that goal, and I would hazard a guess that Katie dreamed she would not only attend Notre Dame but address the graduating class as its valedictorian at her graduation. Personally, I was not defeated when I learned I had seven (7) opponents who had practiced longer and had more money and name recognition than me because I was certain that not one of them could outwork me! PERIOD!!! And they didn't. Let hard work be an uncompromising standard. Make it your calling card.

And finally commit to a life of service. We clearly have a long way to go, despite how far we've come. But we cannot get there unless each of us makes a commitment to the common good. What set Notre Dame apart for me was the idea the law school touted educating a different kind of lawyer. THAT is what I

wanted to be. ***A different kind of lawyer.*** And that is what I set out to be. From my work as an employment attorney advising management on employment-related issues to my work as a Chief Senior Assistant District Attorney, I wanted to be set apart. So, whether you elect to work for a firm billing hours or in public service, you must be devoted to being a different kind of lawyer. And I believe what makes you a different kind of lawyer is what YOU GIVE. Plain and simple. The sooner we recognize we ALL – Black and white, Democrats and Republicans, Catholics and Protestants – are in this thing together, the better off we will be. Our interconnectedness cannot be undone because we are inextricably bound. I can tell you that I found far more value in my practice based on the number of lives I touched rather than the number of hours I billed. For me, there simply was no greater satisfaction than the opportunity to advocate on behalf of a child sex abuse victim who had no voice except the one I gave to her. Or the murder victim whose only crime was loving the wrong man. So, whatever path you choose, ensure that service and giving back are integral to it. You will

find that the reward is more than you could ever imagine. But more than that service is, indeed, the rent we pay for the space we occupy on God's Earth.

So, as each of you reflects on how far we have come and gain inspiration on how far we must go, consider dreaming big, working hard and giving back as a roadmap to move the ball forward so that the next generation of young soon-to-be lawyers who will sit where you sit will draw inspiration from the work you have done and commit to continuing the fight for the causes of justice. In other words, continue to petition to the administration to ensure their commitment to diversity is reflected in its admissions decision. Continue to champion the cases of women and minorities to ensure their full engagement in the law school community. Fight for the rights of the poor and other disenfranchised populations to ensure they have access to justice. After all, if not you then who?

May the good Lord bless and keep each of you. And I thank you again from the bottom of my heart for this incredible honor.