

**Notre Dame BLSA Alumni Dinner
Keynote Remarks – Mark A. Wattley
April 4, 2009**

It really is an honor to be here today with everyone. This year especially it is nice to gather not only in celebration of Notre Dame BLSA alumni and students but also to celebrate current events – the recent election of President Barack Obama and his scheduled visit here next month for Commencement ceremonies. I won't get political here, but regardless of how you voted, the election of President Obama is now and will forever be a watershed moment in the history of our country.

Being asked to speak today at this great event is very humbling; and the theme is daunting – “By the Content of Their Character.” It's one of those great desires that says more about the similarities of people than it does our many differences. Who among us does not prefer to be judged by the content of our character above almost anything else? So I put together just a few thoughts and reflections on what that means to me and how it relates to my experiences and my journey.

First, a little background. In my upbringing and to this day, I had the village – you know that village it takes to raise a child? The village raised me and still helps shape who I am today. My village includes my mother Barbara– quiet strength, incredible work ethic, stoic, loving, giving, and always in my corner. The village also includes Ruth, Theresa, Eleanor, Gertie, Beverly, Sharon, and Jackie – those are my Mom's 7 sisters. Up until a

few years ago, there was my Grandmother. On my Dad's side, there's Mary Ann and there use to be Aunt Wilma and Aunt Catherine, and the grand dame of them all Big Sis. Big Sis was my Dad's oldest sister and she had a hand in raising everybody's kids. Now if you haven't picked up on it yet, my village has and had all these amazing, beautiful, strong black women. No disrespect to my father, my 2 older brothers, or my uncles, but the strength, the backbone are those women. They raised me, my 2 brothers, and my 47, yes 47, first cousins with good hearts but really firm hands. So the first thing to know about me is that I always carry with me this very profound respect and reverence not only for the Black women in my village but really Black Women in general because I believe they have the strongest spirits, the mightiest souls, the most amazing perseverance – they are the glue in the Black community, and they are perhaps the most unsung strength of our country. And what an amazing time we are living in when we can now watch Michelle Obama put all of that soul and all of that character of the community on a world stage.

Next thing you need to know is that I was always a good student. My mom and others pushed me to study hard and stay on track; but it never really felt like I was being pushed. I always liked school and there was usually a natural fit there for me. But along the way, I did have some really amazing teachers – Mrs. Whitaker (Black) in grade school; Mrs. Stein (Jewish) in middle school; Ms. Nelson (White) in High School; Professor Hugh Ingraci (Middle Eastern) at DePaul; and Professor Tom Schafer (just a one of those great old guys) at Notre Dame Law School. Educators who helped expose me to opportunities and possibilities beyond the classroom. Educators who helped lift my

dreams higher and higher. They also helped shape my idea of strong character. These folks all stand out as people of strong character.

So in my 8th grade English class with Betty Stein we were reading “To Kill A Mockingbird”- the classic by Harper Lee; and then we watched the movie adaptation starring Gregory Peck. True story, after I saw that movie in school that day in 8th grade, I went home and told my Mom I was going to be a lawyer. It was the first time I had announced this grand plan. When she asked why, I told her about the book and the movie and I said because lawyers speak up for people who can’t. My Mom said o.k. You can do that. And you know, I never looked back, never second guessed, never had a Plan B. I was on my way. And my Mom and the others in my village said you keep going. You keep going. You keep going. So I kept my dream alive. I knew in high school, that there would be college, and I knew in college that there would be law school.

And all along the way I had people who believed and encouraged and dreamed with me. So it was this dare to dream along with a mix of desire and will fueled by people of amazing character who believed and never doubted and helped in any way they could. One special mentor was my Great Uncle Charles Crutchfield – Uncle Crutch to me. He was my Grandmother’s brother, kind of a distant relative who I had not really known when I was a young boy, but he was the only attorney in the family, and he had this legendary and storied career of military service, legal aid work, academia. He did all of that during times when Black men weren’t supposed to be military officers and lawyers

and professors. Most notably he had managed to take a couple of criminal law cases all the way to the United States Supreme Court. So anyway back in 8th grade my Mom called Uncle Crutch and told him I wanted to be an attorney. And he stepped right into the village and became a real mentor and force in my life. Uncle Crutch was one of the first people to take me further than just dreaming about being a lawyer. He dared me to dream about the kind of lawyer I wanted to be. What character and quality and value would I bring to the Bar. He always said the courts were full of idiot lawyers cluttering up the system – don't be one of them. Another thing you should know about Uncle Crutch – he was a member of the Notre Dame Law faculty from 1974 to 1985. While he was here at Notre Dame he and his wife, my Aunt Jewel, poured much of their time and energy into making sure that Black students would have a real opportunity not only to be admitted to Notre Dame Law but also that they would be successful when they were here. He was really an amazing man. I owe so much to him for setting before me a real world example of not only the character I wanted to bring to the bar, but also the kind of Black man I wanted to be along the way. Another note on Uncle Crutch, when he retired from Notre Dame, he and Aunt Jewel relocated to San Antonio. At the age of 69, Uncle Crutch sat for and passed the Texas Bar Exam. In a letter to Dean Link at the time he said he “intended to continue providing legal assistance to those who cannot afford to pay a lawyer and to those with credible unpopular causes.”

So all along I had this really amazing village of family and teachers and church folks who let me have my dream of being a lawyer. And all along the way they would help in any

way they could. A couple of dollars here; a ride back and forth to school; a good meal; tuition assistance. But most importantly they let me have my dream and they dreamed with me.

So it was on a sunny day in May 1991 near the reflecting pool on the perfectly landscaped campus of Notre Dame I received my law degree. And guess what, the village was there – the entire village. They all came, and my Uncle Crutch (Professor Charles Crutchfield), by then retired, was there and hooded me with my academic vestments. I knew then and I know now that the law degree didn't just belong to me. It belonged to the village because we all got there together. Because it had become a dream for all of us.

Now I don't want you to think that there weren't obstacles along the way. I tell you first about the village because when I came across those obstacles and bumps, it's the village that said boy, you keep on going. You keep on going. You keep on going. And so I did.

After Law School, I went to work at a large Chicago firm. There were about 200 lawyers. There were only two Black associates, including me. It was tough rolling with that crowd. But I had been in other settings in school and such where I was the only Black or one of just a few. But you know I thought I had made it. I was living in downtown Chicago, putting a suit on everyday, going to my little office at the fancy firm. But every now and then there would be a comment or some question or some off the cuff remark at a firm event that just wasn't right. Or there was that push to make sure I was photographed for

the firm brochure – because I was the ethnic diversity. So I did what I do. I hit my numbers and did my thing and did great work and I think I took care of the comments. All along though the village said you keep on going. You keep on going. You keep on going. And so I did.

I left the firm and spent some time working for the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights. Then I moved on to the Chicago Board of Education and cut my teeth as a trial attorney handling some nasty employment cases during the wave of school reform. But there was something different at the Chicago Board of Ed. The leadership in the Law Department and in fact in most of the Board’s leadership roles looked like me. I had never been in a professional or educational setting where there were so many Blacks and other minorities in charge. It was certainly a change to hear my White colleagues talk about their being in the minority. But you know what? We were all there to do the same thing – move the needle on education reform and improve life for Chicago’s 400,000 students. So I worked hard and tried my cases. The village said you keep on going. You keep on going. You keep on going. And so I did.

Then in 1998 I landed at Walgreens. Now I’m a Hoosier from Fort Wayne, IN, so I grew up with Walgreens my whole life. My Grandmother was a big fan of the Wags restaurant in Fort Wayne and we had spent many a day there having hamburgers and my Grandmother always complaining that the coffee tasted like dishwater. When I told my Grandmother, by then she was 88 and had Alzheimer’s, that I was going to work at

Walgreens. She looked at me and she put her hand on my face and she said “Baby, which one are you working at?” It took a while to explain the whole corporate attorney thing. Although I was thrilled to have landed the Employment and Labor Counsel job at Walgreens, I didn’t anticipate the reaction I would have going from the Board of Ed and it’s predominant black and minority leadership out to the hallowed halls of Walgreens Corporate headquarters in Deerfield, IL. In 1998 to be honest, there weren’t all that many Blacks at corporate and there were very few in leadership. It kind of threw me a little bit because I hadn’t really given it a lot of thought before I arrived. I just showed up on my first day. The village said you keep on going. You keep on going. You keep on going.

I’ve been at Walgreens 10 years now. The Company is not without its challenges when it comes to diversity. But it’s not for lack of good intentions and true good faith efforts and in my 10 years there has been tremendous progress in the advancement of women and minorities, and I am proud to be part of that progress. But to bring it down to a more personal level, I have had the good fortune to have found some good mentors and friends at Walgreens who in their own way kind of became part of my village and have said from time to time you keep on going. You keep on going. You keep on going. All along the way, I have remembered the strong characters of those who influenced and supported me. I stayed true to myself and focused on the work that I was tasked with getting done. It’s not about screaming at the top of your lungs and saying look at me, look at me. Am I next? It starts with the work, and the work ethic. Above all else you have to do good

work and let that be your first and most important calling card. Then you do have to find your work friend and your work mentor, and they may or may not be the same person. You may not want them to be the same person. The work friend keeps you real, lets you vent, helps you escape what can sometimes be madness. The mentor is advisor and counselor, maybe a confidant. This little work village will help you with your goals, help you keep your dream going. When you begin to have doubts, they are the ones that will tell you that you have to keep going; you have to keep your dream alive; you have to keep going.

So what does all this mean? For me, as you can tell, I know all about the village. I believe in the village because my village believes in me and they share my dreams. But it can't end there. I have a responsibility to make sure that others are allowed to dream. I have to be the voice for some – to be the one saying you have to keep on going; You have to keep on going. So while I still have my village, I am proud to say that along my path I have stepped into the village of some others, and I dare them to dream and to dream big. Some are close – my niece and nephews; some are strangers – a call from someone asking me to help mentor or tutor a kid in need; there are colleagues; friends; acquaintances. This is where the “By The Content of Their Character” really connects. It's when you pass it on. The very fact that each of us are in this room today means somebody along the way has helped each of us dare to dream. Someone has set examples for us to follow. So how can each of us not help the next person? This passing it on is bigger than you, it's bigger than me, it's bigger than all of us. We all have people reaching out to us looking

for that help. You have to give it. There is so much talk about big dreamers today. Dr. King's I Have A Dream speech; President's Obama's campaign themes and his personal history of hope and dreams. It's all getting a lot of good press. I encourage all of you to make it more than a PR campaign. Give it life. Make it real for others. Turn around and see who is looking to you to be part of their village – part of their dream. Be one of the folks telling them you just keep on going. Keep on going. Keep on going.

So here we all are, at an amazing watershed period in our country's history, and in each of our lives. We all need to play a part in making sure that this does not become a footnote, but that in fact this becomes one of those eras that will define America. It will take a lot of the villages to make sure this keeps going.

In closing, there is a small passage in Dr. King's I have A Dream speech that does not often get much press, but has always stood out to me, and I think is most relevant now.

Dr. King said: *"We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of Now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy."*

That's what Dr. King said, and my hope is that we are all committed to and engaged in the urgency of Now.

Thank you.