



Creating Leaders for the Future

by Dr. Charles Taylor

22nd Annual AHANA High School Leadership Conference

Saturday March 2, 2002 at UW-Milwaukee

It's always a pleasure for me to speak to young people. It was a special honor for me to speak to this group since I was the principal founder of this organization 22 years earlier.

Good evening and thank you for that wonderful introduction. I wish my last boss was present to hear those remarks and my first wife here to believe them. You know the easiest way to stay awake during an after dinner speech is to deliver it. It is such a pleasure and honor for me to address you tonight. When Addie Pettaway and the planning committee invited me to take part I was both surprised and honored. It is an invitation that I relish because I believe strongly—even passionately in the potential of our students of color.

As you may know this conference is one of the oldest of its kind in the U.S. I would like you to join me in extending a round of applause to the planning committee for keeping it going. They have created a program that (over the years) has trained thousands of our young people statewide. Too often we take for granted that new leadership will automatically spring up.

I'd be remiss if I didn't pay homage to brother Joe Thomas (a former counselor at Madison West High School) who has crossed over but whose spirit remains in this room and with this conference. Joe loved young people and he wanted them to succeed. If he were alive today, he would be right here videotaping the proceedings. He would no doubt be pleased to see the seeds he helped plant over 20 years ago bear such wonderful fruit.

You in this room tonight represent the next generation of ethnic leadership. Your presence here tonight tells me you take this leadership responsibility seriously. You see Wisconsin, the U.S. and indeed the larger world community can benefit from your involvement. If there was ever a time we needed leadership that time is now because many of our young brothers and sisters are on the fence where they can be tipped into an unacceptable lifestyle that includes crime and drugs or they can be tipped into a caring youth program where they can be nurtured while they pass through the difficult rites of youth. As student leaders you can be instrumental in helping your peers choose the right path. We need your help to make each young person feel connected and part of the high school community. Help us give real meaning to the pledge to leave no child behind.

When we launched this conference some 20 years ago, we wanted to say to our AHANA youth that we know you're brilliant, talented, and fabulous. So as my grandmother would say—let your light shine. Think Big! Your thinking small doesn't serve your community. Sail away from the safe harbor. As Mark Twain said. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Most people go through life being more cautious than courageous and if they live to be old age they are more disappointed by the things they didn't do.

Don't be afraid to take risks. Keep in mind that no person who only thinks in terms of catching mice will ever catch lions. I want your teachers to see your potential the same way your parents do. If they did, they would know that you wonder at the beauty of the universe, and someday may seek cures for uncommon diseases or dream of a world in which poverty has been conquered.



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We need your leadership because we're losing too many of our young people to prison and the drug war. If there was ever a time that we needed committed people that time is now. For what does it matter to talk about a college education if the funds aren't made available for needy students to attend. What does it matter to rule the world militarily, if we don't have compassion for the world's people? From where I sit you have some tremendous challenges to face in this new century but keep in mind that people can and do make a difference.

I know it's not an easy task to bring about the changes that are needed. Too often you have to deal with some folks like the old farmer used to describe about the mule, "awfully backward about going forward." You also have to deal with some slackers who when they enter high school don't know nothing, don't gain nothing while they're here, leave not knowing nothing and then we put them back in the community. As Howard Fuller says, "We've got to demand that they gain some knowledge while they're here. We have to help students develop a sense of "I have to give something back to the community." Some of you know what I mean.

But I know we haven't come this far to give up now. When you have students whose only bootstrap in life is an education, we have a responsibility to help them achieve academically. It shouldn't matter that a child is low income. It shouldn't matter that a child has interracial parents—it shouldn't matter that a child has only one parent—what should matter is that once that child enters the classroom he or she should be given the best education possible. When that happens we all win!

I wish I could say that every student will receive the support they need from our schools to be successful but it simply would not be the truth. Public schools almost everywhere in America are still separate and still unequal. And to be honest, in most of the U.S. they are more separate racially and less equal financially than they were when I was in school. And even in 2002 we know who is more likely to be placed in a gifted class and who is more likely to be placed in a special class, who is more likely to be suspended or expelled. We can do better! We have to demand that our schools truly prepare our students to compete. We wouldn't put Little Bow Wow in the ring with Mike Tyson and call it a fair fight. By the same token we can't half prepare our children and send them out in the world to sink or swim. We can do better!

Years ago when I was in college, my white colleagues used to tell me that when they got control of these institutions they were going to change things for the better. I remind them from time to time that they're in control now and we're still waiting for that change. Since my generation hasn't done it, maybe it will be your generation who sets things right.

All children are cheated when they are not exposed to the poet Langston Hughes or to Native American storyteller Joseph Bruchac. But it takes sensitive teachers to make sure students get that type of exposure.

Sensitive teachers recognize that there is genius and creativity in AHANA communities. Jesse Jackson says baseball was a great game before Jackie Robinson and Roberto Clemente, but when it expanded to include all baseball players it got better. Football was a great game before Jim Brown, and Gale Sayers but when it expanded it got better. Basketball was a great game before Magic Johnson and Michael Jordan, but when it expanded it got better. The same communities that produced those



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athletic superstars can also produce scientists, bankers, entrepreneurs and even presidents. These so called ghettos and barrios have more than athletes to offer. Student leaders in this room have more to offer because you're motivated.

With motivation you can achieve greatness in spite of life's obstacles. You see, in your lifetime, people of color will be the majority in this country. The challenge is to translate that majority status into political and economic gains. That's why you have to get prepared because someday soon you'll have a nation to run and a world to lead. But you've got to be on fire to give off heat and light. And those of us who are a little older—we understand what you will be going through.

In closing, like the conference planners in this room, I want the doors of equal educational opportunity to always remain open. I know the value of a good education and how it can transform lives and communities. I know what strong leadership can do. You see one strong leader is worth more than 30 committees. That's why this conference is so important and still very much needed today. Use this opportunity wisely because America is in need of your voices, your ideas and your leadership. We need your energy and your vision.

Let me once again thank the planning committee for keeping this dream alive for the past 20 years—for remembering that students are the reason why we're here. For remembering what we're really seeking is change, rather than praise. And that we must never forget those who came before us—thousands of our ancestors whose ribs became ladders for us to climb into the positions that we occupy today. As I look out in the audience tonight I have reason to be optimistic.

I don't believe you'll let us down. Just remember that great leaders are known not by what they know, but by what they share. You've honored me more than you know with this invitation. Thank you so much for inviting me.

-References available upon request-