



Martin Luther King Urban League Awards Breakfast Speech Education is Your Ticket Out

by Dr. Charles Taylor

Sunday January 14, 2007 at the Edgewood High Gymnasium

This speech was given to an audience of over 800 people and half of the audience was young people.

Thank you Ashanti for that warm introduction and very generous exaggerations.

Good morning. I hope you all are enjoying this wonderful breakfast.

I can't eat a big breakfast anymore because I stepped on one of those talking scales recently and it said, "Come back when you're alone."

I'm extremely honored to address you this morning-as we prepare to recognize and honor our young people. I've divided my presentation into three brief parts because I want to share three different topics with you that all relate to this day of service and to the life and legacy of Dr. MLK Jr.

In the first 3-minutes I share the importance of role models by introducing you to one of mine-Mr. Bobby Williams. I never believed the myth that said black students and other students of color have few role models. Just look around this room and you'll see that myth holds no truth.

The 2nd part of my speech is a call to service for our young people to go out and make it a Shay Day and in the final 3-minutes I talk about the importance of education being your ticket out. I end each of these brief segments with WORD!

Some of you may remember the 70's TV show, Welcome back Kotter and the theme song-"Your dreams are your ticket out"-well dreams alone aren't enough, young people. Dr. King had a dream but he combined his dream with a solid education. If you do the same, you'll have your ticket out.

MY ROLE MODEL

Let me introduce you to Bobby Williams.

We thought we were so cool. We thought we were so hip. My friends and I were all 16 years old in the summer of 1966. When Bobby Williams came to town.

Although there are many people in my life who influenced me, it was Bobby Williams who politicized my friends and me and taught us about our history and culture.



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Bobby Williams and his young family drove into my hometown (of Cape Girardeau, Missouri) in a brand new black shiny Chrysler. He was only 24 years old, fresh out of college. He was the first African American male director of our community center and he was from St. Louis.

We thought we were cool.

Before he arrived, chasing girls, playing sports and finding a summer job were all we cared about and in that order. We were in Falstaff field playing tackle football and Bobby asked to join the game. After he scored a touchdown we all looked at him a little bit differently. He knew something about the game. He mapped out a pass route that we hadn't seen before.

We thought we were so hip.

Hey I got a book you guys should check out, Bobby said. It was summer and booking was the last thing on our minds, so we just laughed it off.

He knew each one of us claimed to be the sixth temptation and he had an 8-track in his car blasting MY GIRL. He only had to ask once if we needed a ride home and 8 guys would pile into that shiny new Chrysler. We sneered at him when he asked us if we knew how to rap to girls, because we knew we were players.

But Bobby kept talking:

'Sweetness,

A falling star-that's what you are, from the heavens above. There's no treasure on earth that could match your birth, You're a portrait of love. I know to you, I'm just a lovesick guy, but you're wrong; I need you; I want you by my side. So I'm going to keep on trying until I win your love.'

Why don't you try that and see what happens, Bobby said

Damn, we thought we knew how to rap. He capped our rap. Of course it was only later that we learned that his rap came from a Temptation song.

You guys ever heard of MLK? How about the brother-minister who was assassinated last year, Malcolm X? Check out his autobiography. This time we listened a little more carefully.



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Back in the day there was money available from President Lyndon Johnson's war on poverty programs so Bobby got some of us jobs in the community center. One of the first things he had us do was create a library. He brought in books about black culture and history that we had never heard of before. We learned about African kings and queens and places that we didn't even know existed.

Bobby would come to work sky-clean, every day-what we used to call 'styling and profiling'-with Italian Banlon shirts, Stacy Adam shoes and a brim that was way cooler than what our fathers' wore.

We thought we were cool.

We started having discussions about poverty and racism and why there weren't any blacks on the school board or on the city council. We noticed how these conversations made our parents nervous.

We didn't pay much attention to it at the time because we felt the civil rights movement was some place else, but Bobby made us realize that it had to happen in our hometown too, to have any meaning.

He frightened the town leaders just by insisting that the bill of rights should apply to everyone. He told them the most important part of the pledge of allegiance was the part that said...with liberty and justice for all.

Bobby told us that America could offer us more than dope, jail or the military. He challenged us constantly.

Bobby led marches and he forced people to take sides. It didn't take long for him to be viewed as an outside agitator and our hometown's public enemy number one. A few years later they sent him to prison on a trumped up concealed weapons charge-a gun he legally purchased to protect his family after numerous death threats and a shooting into his home.

I don't know where Bobby is today, but that's not what really matters. I realize now how grateful I was for the time he spent in my life and for all the lessons he taught me. I was able to use those lessons 10 years later when I became director of the community center.

Looking back I knew my friends and I were never the same after the summer of 1966. We grew up that summer, because it no longer mattered whether we were cool.

WORD!



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I wanted to share that true reflection with you this morning because MLK Jr. inspired millions of people to get involved in their communities; people who never met him but believed in his life's calling. People like Bobby Williams who in turn inspired others. He taught us the importance of community service and helping those in need. Every day each of us has the opportunity to serve and to make a difference in someone's life.

MAKE IT A SHAY DAY

Each of us can make a Shay day. You're probably wondering what a Shay day is. Let me share a story about Shay that I found on the Internet.

Shay was born with a physical and mental disability. Shay's father said that one day he and Shay were walking past a park where some boys Shay knew were playing baseball. Shay asked, "Dad, do you think they'll let me play?" Shay's father felt his son's earnest desire to belong, but he also recognized that too often kids focused on Shay's disability. Shay's father approached one of the boys and asked if Shay could play. "We're losing by six runs and the game is in the eighth inning, the boy said. But I guess he can be on our team and we'll try to let him bat in the ninth inning."

Shay struggled over to the team's bench, and with a broad smile, put on a team shirt. His Father watched with a small tear in his eye and warmth in his heart. In the bottom of the eighth inning, Shay's team scored a few runs but was still behind by three. In the top of the ninth, Shay put on a glove and played in the right field. Even though no hits came his way, he was ecstatic just to be in the game, grinning from ear to ear as his father waved to him from the stands. In the bottom of the ninth inning, Shay's team scored again. Now, with two outs and the bases loaded, the potential winning run was on base and Shay was scheduled to bat next. Do they let Shay bat and give away their chance to win the game? Surprisingly, Shay was given the bat. Everyone knew that a hit was all but impossible because Shay was having difficulty holding the bat.

However, as Shay stepped up to the plate, the pitcher, recognizing that the other team was putting winning aside, moved in a few steps closer to lob the ball in softly so Shay could at least make contact. As the pitch came in, Shay swung at the ball and hit a slow ground ball right back to the pitcher. The pitcher could have easily thrown the ball to the first baseman. Shay would have been out and the game would be over. Instead, the pitcher threw the ball over the first baseman's head. Everyone from the stands and both teams started yelling, "Shay, run to first! Run to first!"



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Never in his life had Shay ever run that far, but he made it to first base. He scampered down the baseline, wide-eyed and startled. Everyone yelled, "Run to second, run to second!" Catching his breath, Shay awkwardly ran towards second, gleaming and struggling to make it to the base.

By this time the right fielder had the ball. He could have thrown the ball to the second-baseman for the tag, but he too, intentionally threw the ball high and far over the third-baseman's head. Shay ran toward third base deliriously as the runners ahead of him circled the bases toward home. All were screaming, "Shay, Shay, all the way, Shay." As Shay rounded third, the boys from both teams, and the spectators were on their feet screaming, "Shay, run home! Run home!"

Shay ran to home, stepped on the plate, and was cheered as the hero who hit the grand slam and won the game for his team. "That day," said the father softly with tears rolling down his face, "the boys from both teams helped bring a piece of true love and humanity into this world." Shay didn't live to see another summer. He died that winter, having never forgotten being the hero and making his father so happy! (Author unknown)

But you know Shay felt like he belonged that day, because a group of kids-his peers (the same age as many of you young people in this room) realized they could make a difference in his life. And Shay in turn made a lasting difference in those kids' lives.

You too can make a difference today young people. We need you to make a difference, because we need a Shay day on Allied Drive, we need a Shay day in south Madison and in our nursing homes and in our schools and communities. So go out and make it a Shay day today. Go out and help somebody and you'll find you'll get something back in return.

I am so proud of the awards you're receiving this morning and your willingness to get involved. This is in the best spirit of Dr. Martin Luther King. Young people were a key part of the civil rights movement. Young people like you marched and boycotted and were jailed fighting for freedom. WORD!

EDUCATION IS YOUR TICKET OUT

Dr. King also stressed education because he knew that education was your ticket out. I know some young folks think they can dribble or sky hook their way out, or gangster rap their way out, but that's like looking at a mule's behind and predicting how big a load it can pull. Sports and hip-hop are long-shots. Education is a sure thing. It's your ticket out. It opens up endless possibilities, but it requires some



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sweat equity. As a farmer once said, you can't plough the field by turning it over in your mind. We need you to take a big swig from the fountain of knowledge-don't just gargle.

Young people listen to me now. We need you to continue to be leaders and fill our colleges and not our jails. We need you in our talented and gifted classes and not our remedial ones. We need you to make the honor roll list and not the suspension list. Education is your ticket out.

That's why we old heads get so frustrated and saddened when we hear young people talking about gang banging or read about kids fighting in school. We should never have to hear about a young person bringing a weapon to school. If you want to bring something, bring a library card or a NAACP card or better yet a report card scattered with A's.

We need you to get prepared because in your lifetime, you will have a nation to run. But you have to be ready. I wish I could say that my generation has solved all of the racial problems that you will encounter but that would be a lie. Racism is still our reality. But it's not our crutch. We have tried to make your path a bit easier but our work is far from finished, because we continue to build more prisons than schools. We still act as if the solution to problems in the black community is more police officers, rather than economic development. We've got work to do and young people we need your help.

If we're ever going to turn things around we're going to need motivated students like you. As our future leaders I need you to do three things while in school.

1. I need you to study hard because you can't teach what you don't know, nor lead where you don't go.
2. Don't separate yourselves—Get involved in school activities.
3. Be academically prepared, which means homework done well, classes attended and research papers finished.

Sometimes when I challenge young people like this I have some students tell me, "Dr. Taylor you don't understand what it's like out here because you work with the big people. You have a PhD-you don't understand." I understand.

I tell them that my PhD doesn't stand for public high school diploma. It stands for hard work-paid his dues!



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“But Dr. Taylor my situation is different. I’m just trying to survive day-to-day-you don’t understand.” I understand.

In fact, I can tell your story. I didn’t always have a PhD. I know what it means to be poor. I was 16 years old before we had running water in my house. I understand. We used to joke if our bathroom burned down, it wouldn’t even make it to the back porch-I really do understand.

My first grade class was among the first to integrate my elementary school. I know what it’s like when people are mean to you and tell you that you’ll never amount to anything. I understand. I know about labels and name calling.

My father was the hardest workingman I know. He only had a 6th grade education. He worked from can’t see in the morning until can’t see at night so we could have a better life. I was born into poverty, but as Jesse Jackson says, ‘poverty was not born in me’.

So I’m telling any student who’ll listen-that you can make it, if you’re motivated. Education is your ticket out. Don’t give up; never surrender your dreams. There are people right here in this room that will help you, if you just ask. So don’t you ever surrender! Education is your ticket out. Word!

Thank you and may God bless you.