



## Whitney Young Award Acceptance Speech—A Tribute to my Mother

by Dr. Charles Taylor

*This award was given to me in December, 2010. The Whitney M. Young award is the highest award that local chapters of the Urban League convey and it turned out to be a very emotional night for me and the audience. I received two standing ovations and lots of tears as I paid tribute to my deceased mother.*

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Thank you David so much for that warm introduction and thank you (to the audience). It felt like a big group hug and I'm taking it all in.

As I accept this award I would like to remind everyone who contributed to the Center for Economic Development that the seed we planted with the new facility is bearing fruit. The Urban League is in great hands. The community has bold and creative leadership under Kaleem Caire and the UL board and staff are simply top-notch. Would you please thank them?

Help me to also thank my beautiful wife and partner Camilla for all of her support and love.

I only have about 5-minutes so I'm not going to try and thank everybody in the house, but I do want to use one of those minutes to acknowledge Whitney M. Young, the person the award is named after. Whitney transformed the National Urban League into a major civil rights organization emphasizing better treatment for African Americans in jobs, education, and housing. He was an expert negotiator and a trailblazer who often worked behind the scenes. He would say "someone has to work within the system to change it." He used his great talent to make his community and country better.

That's why this award is so meaningful to me. It celebrates the power of an idea. I want our youth to believe that they can institute change and to know that great ideas that benefit people will find support in this community.

Madison has allowed me to take many ideas and implement them ranging from producing a documentary on the Milwaukee civil rights movement, to staging a wonderful children's play with the support of many of you in this room. There are great opportunities here if you believe in yourself and treat others fairly. But as Whitney Young said "It is better to be prepared for an opportunity and not have one, than to have an opportunity and not be prepared."

That's why I applaud the great vision that Kaleem brings to the table. He understands that we need the best talent we can find, from every group in our community and we can no longer afford to ignore a significant segment of it.

Jesse Jackson says baseball was a great game before Jackie Robinson and Willie Mays, but when it expanded to include all baseball players 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 athletic superstars can also produce scientists, entrepreneurs and even presidents. When all of the cream is allowed to rise to the top, the butter is bound to be better.

The UL understands that and helps to grow talent every day.



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I want to close by sharing a personal story because you never know who you touch and who touches you. I was once written up in the Wisconsin State Journal's -KNOW YOUR MADISONIAN column and they asked me this question: Who is the person you would most want to have dinner with, dead or alive?

I knew immediately that person had to be my mother who died when I was 5 years old. I went on to say there would be so many things I'd like to tell her, and then just hold her for a while.

I didn't know the impact that statement would have. I can't tell you the number of Madisonians who contacted me, black and white, men and women who said they cried when they read that and wanted me to know that I had touched them.

Well, tonight this award touches me, and it would be one of those things I would tell my mother. I would tell her that you've honored me more than you'll ever know with this great award. I would tell her there are certainly others more worthy, but none more grateful. I would tell her this award made me think of two other special women as well—my grandma and my first grade teacher.

It was grandma who taught me to believe in myself; to never surrender my dreams. She would say that wisdom knows no skin color; or a light will shine anywhere so Charles—let your light shine. I would sing back to her: this little light of mine—I'm going to let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

And my first grade teacher, Mrs. Sanders taught me the value of education. She gave me such a great gift. Even after I became an adult, Mrs. Sanders would write me a letter at least once a year, until she died.

You see my 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. But Mrs. Sanders, who was white, was not like that. She let my twin sister Charlotte and me know that she cared and that we were going to learn to read and write in her class.

After her funeral her daughter wrote me and said, Chuck you don't know how much you meant to my mother; and I said, you've got that backwards, you don't know how much your mother meant to me.

So to have these great women behind me meant that I had to excel—they expected nothing less. And they taught me to always remember that what we're really seeking is change, rather than praise.

I graciously accept this award in the name of my mother Inez. Enjoy the rest of your evening. Thank you!

(Standing Ovation)