

Martin Luther King Dinner Remarks
January 22, 2010

- Thank you Reverend Brooks.
- Wonderful to be here this evening. Thank you for your extraordinary work over the years in helping keep alive and vital the legacy of Dr. MLK Jr.
- Also thank you to our wonderful emcees this evening – Merri Dee and Marion Brooks (Channel 5 news anchor).
- Merri Dee is a great friend and colleague over the years. And one of my mother’s favorite people.
- Speaking of my mother, I want to introduce her to you, here with us this evening. Mom just celebrated her 91st birthday.
- Also an honor to be here this evening as we recognize Tom Owens and the fine work of the Cara Program that Tom founded. McCormick Foundation has been proud to be a supporter of the Cara Program’s work for many years. They are so inspiring as they transform lives and help people move from homelessness and poverty into quality full time jobs.
- And, most important, I’d like to thank all of you who came together tonight to remember, honor and celebrate the life, work and legacy of Dr. King.
- I was greatly honored when Rev Brooks invited me to speak here this evening. More than that, I was humbled, and frankly daunted at the prospect of speaking to this group –

including many leaders in the community and some who knew and worked with Dr. King, on an evening so significant, on a subject so momentous to this city and our country.

- And this is the 43d gathering to remember Dr. King – what could I add to the voices of mayors, governors, ministers, and community and civil rights leaders who have stood before you since 1968.
- I was 13 years old when Dr. King brought the struggle for civil rights north to the city of Chicago. I was deeply immersed in the affairs of childhood in Park Ridge, but I do have memories of some of the momentous events of that period.
- I remember when it was a very special thing to launch a rocket into space, so they would wheel a big boxy television into the class room to watch live from Cape Canaveral.
- I remember, three years before Dr. King came to Chicago, coming back to school after lunch on a Friday in November 1963, and being sent home again when our teachers told us that the President had been shot in Dallas.
- I remember a scary ad on TV from the 1964 presidential campaign showing a little girl with a flower and an atomic bomb seeming to explode behind her.
- And from the summer Dr. King came to Chicago, I remember a few things. I remember that he and his family moved into a neighborhood on the west side. I remember that there were big marches. I remember that there was rioting, and that Gov. Otto Kerner called out the National Guard to patrol the streets.

- It wasn't until much, much later that I began to understand the meaning of these events – for our city, and our country, and for all of us as individuals.
- That is what I would like to talk to you about this evening – the Chicago Freedom Movement in the summer of 1966, and what it tells us about Dr. King, ourselves, and the work that goes on.
- In July of 1966, MLK was 37 years old. He had already accomplished far more than all but a few people do in a long lifetime. He had led the Montgomery bus boycott after Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat. He had formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, had given one of the most famous speeches in the history of the English language at the Lincoln Memorial. He had led the march from Selma to Montgomery. His work led to the major civil rights laws of 1964 and 1965. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. He was Time Magazine Man of the Year. He had also been repeatedly arrested, beaten, spat upon and tear gassed.
- For most human beings that would have been more than enough – way more. Not for Dr. King. He had his sights on another mountain. He knew that racism and poverty were not just a Southern problem, but an American problem, and so he had to take the struggle north of the Mason Dixon line.
- As recounted in Stephen Oates' biography "Let the Trumpet Sound," many of his own advisors argued against it. They should stay focused on the south and register new voters, some said; a northern city like Chicago was too big, too

complex; you can't fight city hall and the machine. And on and on.

- But Dr. King did come to Chicago.
- He saw this as the future of the struggle. Beyond ending segregation in public facilities, and securing voting rights, the movement would extend to housing and jobs and real participation in the American dream.
- In announcing the Chicago movement, Dr. King declared that “our primary objective will be to bring about the unconditional surrender of forces dedicated to the creation and maintenance of slums.”
- “The Negro in 1966 now challenges society to make law real on the neighborhood level, down to the ghetto streets where he lives, works and seeks opportunity.” Oates p. 394
- He viewed Chicago as the most ghettoized city in America. He thought if Chicago could be redeemed, so could the whole country.
- He said at the time “It is in Chicago that the grapes of wrath are stored.”
- And there was wrath.
- On Freedom Sunday, July 10, Dr. King led a march of tens of thousands in sweltering 98 degree heat to Soldier Field; they marched on to City Hall and posted demands for reform on the City Hall door.

- Rioting broke out on July 12 and again on July 14 that left 2 dead, 56 injured, and nearly 300 in jail.
- To protest segregated housing, Dr. King led marches from Marquette Park and into white neighborhoods – and marched under a rain of insults, slurs, bottles and bricks – one of which struck Dr. King in the head and knocked him down.
- Dr. King said at the time “I have never seen anything like it. I’ve been in many demonstrations all across the south, but I can say that I have never seen – even in Mississippi and Alabama – mobs as hostile and as hate filled as I’ve seen in Chicago.”
- Historians debate what was accomplished in that Chicago summer of 1966.
- There were agreements to bring a stop to discrimination in housing, but the promises were not fulfilled.
- One concrete result was the establishment of Operation Breadbasket, with a focus on jobs and fair hiring, under the direction of another young and articulate leader, Rev. Jesse Jackson.
- More broadly, as Taylor Branch suggests in his biography “At Canaan’s Edge”, “Chicago nationalized race” ...it revealed the fiction that bigotry and discrimination were just a problem of southerners...”
- But that still left me asking, why did Dr. King launch this assault on the whole edifice of inequality and poverty – against all the evident odds and obstacles.

- Leaving aside God's guidance, which was part of Dr. King's explanation, I think the answer lies in the persistence of his character in the struggle for what he saw as right.
- Urgency and moral imperatives run through all of his work – and certainty in the ultimate triumph.
- As he said in Montgomery after the march from Selma, addressing how long the effort would take: "How long? Not long, because no lie can last forever; How long? Not long, because you will reap what you sow. How long? Not long because the arm of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice." Oates p364.
- Nor did his commitment give way to political calculations.
- When President Kennedy was in Europe visiting with Khrushchev, Dr. King was told that demonstrations would embarrass the President, Dr. King replied – "don't they understand that we've been embarrassed all our lives?"
- And, in Chicago, criticized and asked to stop the neighborhood marches, Dr. King replied -- "you want us to stop marching, make justice a reality. I don't mind saying to Chicago – or to anybody – I'm tired of marching. I'm tired of marching for something that should have been mine at birth. If you want a moratorium on demonstrations, put a moratorium on injustice. If you want us to end our moves into communities, open these communities."
- To me, the other extraordinary quality of Dr. King's character, rooted deeply in his theology and beliefs – was

his steadfast commitment to non-violence in the face of violence, and a gospel of love in the face of hate.

- Dr. King had travelled to India and studied Gandhi, and was deeply affected by his philosophy and work.
- Dr. King would so often quote “he who lives by the sword will perish by the sword.”

“To meet hate with retaliatory hate would do nothing but intensify the existence of evil in the universe. Hate begets hate, violence begets violence; toughness begets a greater toughness. We must meet the forces of hate with the power of love. Oates p. 79

- It is almost unimaginable how anyone could sustain this state of grace given all he saw and suffered and was set back by. Even many in the civil rights movement thought Dr. King’s non-violence would not work, or take too long given the hostile opposition they faced.
- But he never wavered. And that made him, in his time, the most powerful moral leader in the world.
- So here we are tonight, 43 years after Dr. King’s death. How should we assess the state of Dr. King’s vision? What lessons can we take from his life about the work still to be done?
- I think Dr. King would have been the first to remark on areas where progress has been made.
- In the years since Dr. King’s death, the legal apparatus of segregation has been mostly demolished; the Voting Rights Act has been highly effective in securing the vote for African

Americans and other minorities. In 2008, voter turnout among African Americans was the highest of any group in the country, helping propel the election of President Obama.

- But on the cause that brought Dr. King to Chicago in 1966 – inequality and poverty that keeps so many families, including African American families, from participating in the bounty that America creates – the picture is bad, and in some respects worse than in Dr. King’s time.
- Fewer than half of African American children in Chicago graduate from high school.
- The unemployment rate among AA in Chicago is 17%, nearly double the national rate. The unemployment rate among African American youth is a staggering 50%.
- More than a third of African Americans and 20% of Hispanics in this city live in poverty.
- These figures dramatically confirm, as Dr. King said, that change does not roll in “on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle.” Oates, p.100
- Affirming – increasing – our commitment to this struggle is the right way to celebrate Dr. King’s life.
- And much good work *is* being done by so many people, including many of you in this room. We have the privilege of working with many of you.
- Tonight, we are celebrating the work of the Cara Program and its founder Tom Owens.

- I would like to take a moment to acknowledge some others as well.
- Many organizations across the city are joining together with public agencies to combat the unacceptable level of gun violence in our communities.
- Nothing else we try to do for our children will matter if we can't keep them safe – that is a fundamental civil right.
- Cortez Trotter is leading this city wide effort for the Mayor with help from the Civic Consulting Alliance. Cortez and his wife Wendy are here, as is Terry Mazany who is leading this work for CPS, having answered the call from Mayor Daley to serve as ceo.
- We have three friends with us tonight from City Year—Jewan Garner and two of the current corps members: Glenna Mowry and Justin Apuli. With the inspiring motto, “give a year, change the world”—City Year does just that, uniting young people of all backgrounds for a year of full-time service to Chicago communities, graduating nearly 800 corps members and helping nearly 10,000 children through mentoring and tutoring programs since 1994.
- Chicago is also fortunate to have one of the best Junior ROTC programs in the nation, focused on high school students. JROTC teaches young people the value of citizenship and leadership, service to community and personal responsibility. With us tonight are LTC (ret.) Kim Harrell, Director of the Chicago JROTC, Cadet Commander Jessica Morales, and Cadet Master Sergeant Roemello Melgoza.
- Citizens and communities cannot tackle the problems we face without access to news and information needed to take action.

This is a passion for our foundation since we grew out of the news business in Chicago. I want to call out the work of the Chicago Reporter, which for 35 years has investigated and reported on critical issues of race and poverty in Chicago. Alden Loury, publisher of the Reporter, was not able to be with us this evening.

- Another friend and partner I want to acknowledge is the Carole Robertson Center in North Lawndale. With us tonight are Gail Nelson, CEO, and Cerathel Burnett, Director of Curriculum Initiatives and Professional Education. The Center, which was named for one of the four young women who died in the 1963 bombing of the Birmingham Baptist Church, focuses its work on the education and development of our youngest children and their families.
- And if I may, I would like to speak to that issue: the singular importance of what we do for kids in these earliest years – which can make the difference between success and poverty, and whether they really can get a more equal shot at the American dream.
- Dr. King understood the critical importance of education—what it could do for children when it was good, what it did TO children when it was bad.
- We see the influence of early childhood development in Dr. King himself. He had a strong, loving family, including a fairly strict father, the Sr. Rev. King, pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church, a quietly loving mother, and a grandmother he adored.
- In Dr. King’s words. “My home situation was very congenial. I have a marvelous mother and father . . .it is quite easy for me to think of a God of love mainly because I grew up in a family where love was central . . . it is quite easy for me to lean more

toward optimism than pessimism about human nature mainly because of my childhood experiences.”

- His parents made him know he was somebody, indeed someone very special, even in a segregated world that yelled something very different at black children.
- This nurturing early education of Dr. King continued on at the Oglethorpe Elementary School in Atlanta. Dr. King himself cited the influence of his first grade teacher, Miss Lemon.
- The tragedy for many young children today is that they don't have the bedrock of family and early education that shaped Dr. King – and that so many of us were fortunate to have. Sadly, this is particularly true for children living in poverty, of all races, but disproportionately African Americans and Latinos.
- Only 54% of African American children in Illinois go to pre-school and only 35% of Latino children.
- Experience and research show that the early years after birth are a critical time in a child's development. Shockingly—by the time kids reach kindergarten —many will already have fallen a grade level or two behind other children – right at the start.
- Critically these are not just the cognitive and scholastic skills – like reading and math. The so-called “soft” skills also suffer – things like – motivation, self-esteem, self-control – really character traits. (Heckman p 12)
- As Dr. King himself said: “We must remember that intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true education.”

- And if you start out behind, it usually gets worse. And so does the inequality.
- According to Advance Illinois' Report Card on Education in Illinois, when we look at fourth graders, only 11% African American and 16% Latino students were proficient in reading, compared with 44% of white students.
- By high school it's worse, and by then very hard to fix.
- The long-term costs of not meeting the needs of our youngest learners are staggering, both to the economy and to society. It is an assembly line to failure—or, in some cases, the pre-school to prison pipeline.
- The good news is that we know how to address these early childhood needs.
- And if the moral demands to fix this were not enough; the economic case is plenty strong too. Research, including from Professor James Heckman at the University of Chicago, tells us that investments made in providing quality early childhood education have some of the best economic returns of anywhere we can put our scarce public funding.
- In this budgetary and economic environment, it may be hard but it is more critical than ever to grow our investment in the education of our youngest citizens.
- Nor is this the sole responsibility of the government – the business and not for profit sectors have a big role, as do we as individuals and families.

- And that brings me back to the Carole Robertson Center – it embodies and inspires a model for this work. It was created by parents and residents in the community who in 1976 faced the loss of a school based program. It continues to be OF the community in governance and management.
- It is supported by a wide base of public and private agencies.
- And its work is effective and moving.
- I could say it speaks for itself, but let me share the words of Ana Lopez, a mother of children in the Center’s programs, and also a board member.

"Every day, I try to demonstrate to my children the importance of education. I want to show them a positive attitude and that I love them. The Center helps me be there for my children. They’ve shown me how to be a good parent, a better parent, and an understanding parent. The Center has been instrumental in helping me help my children. My children have great self-esteem—they love themselves, love others, and respect others—all things I want them to do. “

- What could better express the spirit of Dr. King’s work at the personal, family level? Building character and opportunity and success, one child at a time, one family at a time, one community at a time, and on and on.
- That was the vision of love and human dignity that brought Dr. King to Chicago.
- It remains a vision for Chicago worthy of Dr. King
- And worthy of a commitment by all of us to make it a reality.

- Thank you for allowing me to be a part of this very special evening.