

“A Change Has Come”

**NAACP AWARDS BANQUET
Marshall County Recreation Center**

Saturday, May 2, 2009

Grace and Peace be unto you.

I am humbled to have been asked to be here tonight. I personally would like to thank Mr. Gary Davis and Ms. Renee Freeman for inviting me and for making it possible for me to celebrate this evening with you.

It's good to be home; I see some familiar faces in the crowd. I have family and friends here whom I have known all my life, and whether they want to accept it or not, they're going to have put up with me for years to come. I'll always find a way to come back to Lewisburg.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you tonight and talk about this wonderful idea: *A Change Has Come*. Relating to this theme, I have been asked to comment on a number of topics, such as the importance of education, about my personal and professional journey, and about what it will take for us as a people to continue getting from there to here, and beyond.

So if we're going to talk about this idea of *A Change Has Come*, we've got to talk about Barack Obama. I remember the days before the election. I had friends all over the

country calling me. Some were confident, believing that the time was right for change. Others were nervous, fearing that even in 2008, a black man couldn't be elected president in America. I somehow knew that I had done everything I could do to support Barack Obama, and my heart and mind were right. I never doubted that he wouldn't win the election. I don't know about you, but I could see God working things out along the way.

As I sat with friends in New Haven on that amazing night last November and listened to President-elect Obama address that crowd of hundreds of thousands of people in Grant Park, I learned something from him. If you listen closely, you'll learn something pretty much every time Barack Obama makes a speech. There he was, talking to that crowd so calmly and with such grace, like it was just a small group of friends. There he was in what he called a "defining moment" in the history of this country and the world. He acknowledged the moment and its historical relevance. But he did not stop there. He moved confidently to the next chapter. He talked about the future and our challenges and the essential need for all of us to come

together with determination and a sense of sacrifice to solve some of the most profound problems that we have faced as Americans. He set the tone of his presidency—change was not a single static event or a single moment, no matter how profound. Change is an evolving force, and change can only come through tenacity and determination and belief and vision. So let's be clear, a change has not come just because of President Obama. President Obama, like me, and like many of you, are taking advantage of the opportunities we have because of the blood, sweat, and tears of those who came before us. Because of them, we are better able to walk through the doors that haven't always been open to us.

Several weeks ago, I listened to President Obama at a press conference. He has such a tremendous command of issues and he can move seamlessly from talking about the economy to talking about health care reform to education. At the end of the press conference, I learned something from him again. He said, "I'm a strong believer in persistence. If you're just persistent, you can get a lot of things done."

That struck me coming from President Obama. When you hear him talk or you read his books, you're always struck by how smart he is. He's just heavy, one of the brightest public figures you'll ever see or hear. But there he was—not talking about the importance of intelligence or political power, but talking about the power of persistence. That's how he has lived his life—by being persistent. And that really connected with me. Because that's how I have tried to live my life.

As I told you, I grew up right here in Lewisburg—went to Hardison, McCord, and Jones elementary schools, then on to Connelly Jr. High School, and graduated from Marshall County High School. I was always a hard-working student—my parents would have it no other way. They kept me in line and they taught me that whatever the endeavor, you had to show up, compete every day, and more importantly, never quit—whether it was in math or Biology classes or on the field, or on the court. My dad coached my brother and me in Little League baseball and there were many days when I couldn't do anything—when I couldn't hit the fastball or throw a strike. If you really think about it,

baseball is largely a game of failure, but one must endure all the failures in order to bask in those magic moments of success. That's how it is with life—if you're willing to jump in and try new things, you're gonna fail many times, and there are going to be times when you ask yourself, "How did I get myself in such a mess?" But I'm here to tell you that those are the times when you make the decision to stay in the batter's box and take on the challenge. I'm here to tell you, **STAY IN THE BATTER'S BOX**—I promise you, you'll be glad you did.

For the benefit of the young people who are here tonight, I was asked to talk a bit about myself and about how I got from there to here. I don't spend a great deal of time thinking about myself, but as I sat considering how I wanted to present my story, I had to do some serious reflection.

It's no doubt that my parents have been and continue to be the biggest influence in my life. They worked tirelessly to give my brother, Terry, and me a chance at a better life. They demanded a lot from us. Research has shown that

children really want to impress their parents, guardians, or people they look up to. They really want people to be proud of them. In most cases, children will give you what you ask for—the more you ask, the more they'll give. Parents—it's important and necessary to ask—NO--DEMAND and expect more from your children. Are you listening?

In addition to having nurturing parents, I also can point to my extended family members, numerous friends, teachers, professors, ministers, and mentors for being role models, for providing life-changing opportunities, and for encouraging me along the way. I can't say thank you enough.

If you don't hear anything else from me tonight, please listen to this. Whatever you plan to do in life, it is important to be prepared, **ALWAYS**. Don't ever think that you're going to get that big job or step into an important role if you haven't fully prepared yourself for it. When things are equal with your competition and you're running neck and neck, don't get mad or make excuses if you are

not chosen for the position. You can't be equal with your competition, you have to be better than your competition, and that means you have to properly prepare yourselves academically, socially, personally, and spiritually.

There also will be times when you're presented an opportunity to do something or to be part of something that doesn't quite line up with your career goals. If this ever happens to you, I urge you to think long and hard before rejecting any opportunity that comes your way. The path to success and fulfillment is not a straight path—it consists of many twists and turns. Never think that learning something different or doing something that on the surface might not be significant is a waste of your time. Do the work that no one else wants to do. It really might not make sense, but before you pass on any opportunity, beware—this could be and is often God's way of preparing you for something greater down the road. This certainly has been true for me.

Let me explain.

I love gospel music—I listen to it all the time; if I had to choose one song that tells my story better than any other, I'd have to say it would be the song Pastor Darryl Coley made famous in the nineties, called, "He's Preparing Me." For those of you who might not be familiar with the song, Pastor Coley basically explains that there will be times when we are confronted with obstacles that we may not be able to handle, but whether we are aware or not, God is constantly preparing us for everything that comes in our lives.

The song goes:

He's preparing me, for something, I cannot handle right now. He's making me ready just because he cares. He's providing me with what I'll need. To carry out the next matter in my life. He's preparing me for everything that comes in my life.

Then the song goes on to say that not only is God preparing you, but he's:

He's maturing me. He's training me. He's tuning me. He's purging me. He's pruning me. He's arranging me.

And he's rearranging my attitude. He's teaching me how to obey his will.

He's getting me ready for the warfare, so he makes sure that I have on the whole armor of God.

And then all of a sudden, I find myself growing in the knowledge of the Lord. I'm not my own, so I go where he says for me to go, even when it doesn't make sense. I find myself smiling through my tears. Then my work becomes a sweet song in his ear. He's getting out everything that's not like him. He's cutting away everything that's not like him.

I find these words so powerful, and now that you have the words of this song on your mind, let me say a little bit about my journey and how this song gives meaning to my life's experience.

Since I graduated from high school and left Lewisburg, I have had an array of wonderful and transforming experiences. I attended college at the University of the South, a small national liberal arts college in Sewanee, Tennessee, about an hour and a half drive from Lewisburg.

At Sewanee, a few of my activities included playing on the varsity basketball team, serving as a proctor of a dorm, and as a French and Political Science major; I also studied the French language in Paris, France. **(When I was at Sewanee, God was maturing and training me).**

Sewanee is a quirky place, founded right before the Civil War by leaders in the Episcopal Church. Sewanee has beautifully constructed buildings made of cobblestone, and one of my favorite buildings is All Saints' Chapel. I grew up in the Baptist Church, but as part of my curiosity to learn about and understand other denominations, I often attended services at All Saints' Episcopal Church, where I sometimes served as usher.

While Sewanee has buildings that are named after many of its founders, it also has buildings with names like Rebel's Rest. Part of the history of the university is connected to the Old South and the confederacy, and Sewanee, like other southern colleges and universities has a history that conjures up images of segregation, hatred, and bigotry. **(He was getting me ready for the warfare).**

When I attended Sewanee in the 1980s, there were precious few African-American students on campus. But that was part of the challenge for me—to help that small college on the Cumberland Plateau become more diverse and accepting of people of color. I graduated from Sewanee and went Charlotte, North Carolina to work in the banking industry for a few years. And then Sewanee recruited me back to become an assistant director of admission with one of my primary tasks being to increase the number of students of color at Sewanee, and that I did, way more than anyone expected. **Young people—do more than is expected of you.**

My time at Sewanee successfully recruiting students and working with the administration really set the stage for my lifelong commitment to education, and specifically to higher education. I left Sewanee after three years and got my master's degree in clinical social work at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, you know, CAROLINA, the Tar Heels, Men's Basketball National Champions. President Obama predicted that they'd win it all, and so did I—they were destined to win it all this year, and they did!

I used my master's degree to return to the academy, but this time I worked in a place vastly different from the isolated mountaintop campus of Sewanee. I had the privilege to be a clinical pediatric social worker at Duke University Medical Center's Pediatric Blood and Marrow Transplantation program. The largest dedicated pediatric transplant program in the nation, the Duke Pediatric Bone Marrow Transplant team has performed over 1,200 transplants since the program's creation in 1990.

My job was to work with some of the sickest kids in the world, kids who might have been diagnosed with the many different forms of cancer, or other more obscure, life-threatening diseases. Children and their families came to Duke from around the world—it was the last chance for many of them to find a cure. I worked with Dr. Joanne Kurtzberg and her team to help the children and their families understand and deal with the complex procedures. **(At Duke, God was tuning me, getting me ready for the next chapter in my life).**

Today, over half of all the children treated at Duke since

the program was established in 1990 are surviving long-term and are considered cured of their underlying diseases. While more than half made it through the program, many children did not, and I watched many of them die in the unit. It was a wrenching experience, sitting with the families and their amazingly brave children during the final moments of their lives. Those are experiences that I will never forget.

What I learned from these kids was the power of persistence, of facing incredible odds and surviving and fighting with everything they had. I also learned about the power of academic medicine and how experimental and novel treatments at places like Duke can save lives.

Though I left Duke more than 10 years ago, there are several families that still remain in touch with me on a regular basis. There are other families with whom I've lost contact, but some of them have been able to find me. Recently, I received an email from one of the first families that I worked with. They googled me and found my email address. This is what they had to say:

Marichal,

This is Michelle Ridge. My daughter Emily was a one year old patient at Duke back in 1995. I was just going through some things that have been packed for 13 years and decided to look up a few people who were so good to us during that time. Emily is now 14 yrs old. She has done wonderfully well. We are experiencing some of the late effects of the chemo at this time but we deal with that and go on. She is alive and God is good. Thank you so very much for making a bad time in our lives easier.

Marichal you were like a breath of fresh air when you would come in our room...with your kind smile. That was such a horrible time for us all. Praise the Lord...my daughter has no memory of it, but as a mother, I will never get over it.

We just moved to another house and I'm still unpacking. I found this box that had been taped up and stored for nearly 13 years. I opened it and there were cards, letters, blood counts, and other papers that we collected during our time at Duke. Going through that box made me want to get in touch with some of the people who were so kind to us, and I'm so glad I found you. My daughter is a true miracle from God. She loves the Lord, attends Christian school and does summer missionary work. God healed her. It wasn't my will but HIS. That was hard. God Bless you.

I think Emily is getting old enough to see that box for herself, to see all the prayers, cards, and letters. We will do it together someday soon. Send me a picture, so when I tell her about you and how you helped our family through a tough time, I can show her what you look like.

God Bless.

Michelle

After six years at Duke, my career path took yet another

turn. I was recruited by Middlebury College, a national liberal arts college in a small village in rural Vermont, to serve as associate dean of student affairs. Why, I asked, is a black man moving all the way up to Vermont, the whitest state in the Union? Then I remembered a phrase in my song, **(I'm not my own, so I go where HE says for me to go)**. I moved from working with sick kids and their families to interacting with incredible college students, helping them to develop as individuals. Part of my job involved creating new programs and opportunities for undergraduates at Middlebury. I was the good cop. The other part of my job included overseeing the campus judicial system—at times, I was the bad cop. When Middlebury students heard the name Dean Gentry, sometimes they smiled and sometimes they quivered—most of the time, they smiled.

I had no intentions of staying in Vermont for as long as I did. Though I was part of an interesting community, enjoyed having my own gospel radio show on Sunday mornings, and while I felt at home in this unknown land, I knew eventually, I wanted to move south. Perhaps the most meaningful experience I had in Vermont was for more than

two years, I took in a young boy who needed a family and a home. Overnight, I became a parent, and that's what kept me in Middlebury for eight years. **(During this time in my life, God was teaching me to obey his will).**

Two years ago—out of the blue—I got a call from a recruiter who was working with Yale University. Yale was looking for a dean of student affairs, she told me, and they thought I might be a good fit for the position. I was honored to be considered for a position at one of the prestigious universities in the world. I knew I wanted to leave Middlebury and get back to the south, but I didn't know if being at Yale University in the state of Connecticut was where I wanted to be. I talked with some friends and they told me to go through the process—there was nothing I could lose from learning about the position and Yale. After several days of exhausting interviews and several visits to the campus, Yale offered me the job as dean of student affairs and as Associate Dean of Yale College in June of 2007. I started working in August of the same year, and Yale has lived up to the bill. It is a fascinating place with fascinating people and incredible opportunities. I have

traveled with the Yale symphony orchestra to Italy, and they even let me play percussion on four different pieces of music.

Last summer I took a trip to East Asia—traveling from Japan to China to Korea—to learn about and support Yale’s study abroad programs. I have had dinner with the great jazz trumpet player Wynton Marsalis and with Denzel Washington and met people ranging from Paul McCartney of the Beatles, to Dick Ebersol, the president of NBC Sports.

And though I sometimes believe that I don’t deserve these blessings, I always remember that God has prepared me to receive them. *“He’s preparing me, and he’s always making me ready for the next matter in my life.”*

A place like Yale affirms one’s belief in the possibilities of education. But I’m not here tonight to tell you that everyone needs to go to Yale. I didn’t attend Yale, and I’ve done alright. But what I am here to tell you is that education is a transforming experience. It’s so refreshing to have a president like Barack Obama who has stated so

clearly and forcefully that education is one of his priorities and must be one of the priorities for our country as we move forward. President Obama's vision is clear and right on the mark. He has stated that we need to focus on three areas to overcome the economic crisis and get this country on track for the future: energy, healthcare, and education.

I would argue that all of these priorities, which are so vital, are connected to education. New green energy technology will be dependent on research and development that will come from universities and the private sector. Solutions to our healthcare crisis, from providing new technology for medical records to creating public health initiatives to providing more access for under served populations, will be influenced by experts at universities and academic medical centers.

President Obama's focus on education is heartening, and we should all heed his advice. The data are clear: high school graduates have more opportunities than those who don't graduate from high school. College graduates have more opportunities than those who don't have college

degrees. People in the workforce who continue to educate themselves about their industries and work on advanced degrees have more opportunities to thrive in their jobs. President Obama is pushing us to regain our preeminence in the world of education, and specifically higher education. The competition in the world is fierce. During my trip to East Asia, I saw the commitment on the part of the Japanese, the Chinese, and the Koreans to education. They study hard, they put in the time, and they are committed to education. As I look at this country, I see a similar commitment to education among some students, but certainly not all. The fact that today, in 2009, almost one-third of Americans don't graduate from high school is unsatisfactory. President Obama has a long-term plan to change the tide in education, and I know my colleagues and I are committed to working with him to fulfill his vision.

We must focus on how we can ensure that every American has the will and the opportunity to attend college and realize his or her potential. For the high school students in the audience, I encourage you to find a college or university that will be a good fit for you and pursue higher

education with commitment and passion. There's a quote from David Walker who wrote the *Appeal*, one of the most aggressive anti-slavery documents of its time that resonates with me. Let me read it you:

“I would crawl on my hands and knees through the mud and mire to the feet of a learned man, where I would sit and humbly supplicate him to instill into me, which neither devils nor tyrants could remove, only with my life—for black people to acquire learning in this country, makes tyrants quake and tremble on their sandy foundation.”

Education is the great equalizer in this country. Education is a transforming force—it allows people to see the world differently, to comprehend its complexities, and to find ways that people can make a difference. That's certainly what my educational experiences have done for me.

And for the high school students out there contemplating college, let me tell you another thing. College will likely be the most fun and liberating four years you'll ever have in your life. You don't have your parents breathing down your neck, asking when you came in last night. Now that doesn't mean you won't have your professors, coaches, or advisers

breathing down your neck, but at least it won't be your mom or dad.

College will give you independence that you've never had before. Sometimes you'll make good decisions and sometimes not so good. But they'll be your decisions. College will give you the opportunity to meet people from places you've never heard of. It will give you the chance to sit down face to face with some of the brightest men and women on the planet and talk about issues that matter.

Now I know that the path to college for high school students can be frightening. There are so many colleges out there and so many hoops to jump through. Some of you have done very well in high school and others of you might be struggling a little bit. Let me make one thing clear. If you have the commitment, you can go to college. For some of you, the path might be straight and easy—you apply to your first choice, you get in, and all is good in the world. For others, you might need to attend a local community college and then transfer to a four-year university. Whatever the path, I can guarantee one thing—you will

never regret the effort that you exerted by earning a college degree. **Never.**

I am reminded of something that motivational speaker and author, Les Brown, said on the topic of being determined and never giving up. He once said:

"If you want a thing bad enough to go out and fight for it, to work day and night for it, to give up your time, your peace and your sleep for it...

If all that you dream and scheme is about it, and life seems useless and worthless without it...

If you gladly sweat for it and fret for it and plan for it and lose all the terror of the opposition for it...

If you simply go after that thing you want with all of your capacity, strength and sagacity, faith, hope and confidence and stern pertinacity...

If neither cold, poverty, famine, nor gout, sickness nor pain, of body and brain, can keep you away from the thing that you want...

If dogged and grim you beseech and beset it, with the help of GOD, you WILL get it!!"

I also know that different high schools have different levels of support to help students make decisions about colleges and universities. Some counselors and schools are on top of things—others may not have the resources to help students

make choices about how to transition from being a high school student to applying and getting accepted to a community college or a national university. Some of your parents might be overwhelmed by the process of how to apply and they may question whether they can afford to pay for a college education. Here's my advice—apply and get accepted first. After you're accepted to a college or university, then you can start the process of finding solutions to the issue of how you will pay.

For those high school students in the audience who have the college application and admission process figured out, I applaud you. But let me make a personal offer to those of you with questions or concerns. I am going to leave my contact information available for everyone in the audience. If you have a question about the college selection and application process, if you are feeling overwhelmed about how to get to the next level, you can contact me directly. If I don't have an answer for you, and make no mistake I often don't have answers, I'll find someone who does. That is my commitment to you. And that commitment applies to parents and students.

So I've been talking about education for a while, and as you can see, I'm passionate about education. But there's another part of the Change Has Come theme that I want to explore. And that's the theme of race. The NAACP just celebrated its 100 year anniversary of its founding on February 12, 1909, a little less than a month after Barack Obama was inaugurated as the 44th president of the United States.

How many of you watched the inauguration? How many of you cried tears of joy? For black people in this country, that historic day on January 2009 has to be one of the defining moments of our lives.

To hear Aretha Franklin, still in her glory, sing "*My Country Tis of Thee, Sweet Land of Liberty, Of Thee I sing. Land where my Fathers died, Land where the Pilgrims' pride, from every mountain side, let freedom ring.*" That was magical for me.

To hear the Rev. Joseph Lowery, a civil rights icon who marched with Dr. King, give the benediction and end with these words:

Lord, in the memory of all the saints who from their labors rest, and in the joy of a new beginning, we ask you to help us work for that day when black will not be asked to get back, when brown can stick around -- when yellow will be mellow -- when the red man can get ahead, man -- and when white will embrace what is right.

Let all those who do justice and love mercy say amen.

And to hear President Obama's speech, again so clear and righteous, imploring us to come together for a common good:

We remain a young nation, but in the words of Scripture, the time has come to set aside childish things. The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit; to choose our better history; to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea, passed on from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness.

I hope we will continue to listen to President Obama and learn from him. I know that I will. He is echoing the words, the hopes, and dreams of our forefathers and mothers who fought and died for the change we are

experiencing. Yes, a Change Has Come, but let's not stop moving forward.

My name is William Marichal Gentry, and I am the eldest son of William Howard and Annette Gentry. I am able to live my dreams because many people who came before me paved the way. I pray that I am making a difference, and that I am making my ancestors proud!

Thank you—God bless and keep you all safely in His loving arms.