

Good morning everyone.

I would first like to say what an honor it is to have the opportunity of addressing this distinguished body of individuals that make up the North Carolina Black Elected Municipal Officials, and I am particularly honored considering this morning represents the special occasion of your 30th Anniversary.

Before I begin my remarks, I would like to begin by thanking the leadership of this great organization for allowing me this opportunity, the honorable Mayor Antonio Blue, Mayor Howard Morgan, Councilwoman Mary Johnson and the rest of the distinguished board.

I would also like to thank Ms. Shelia Morton, the organization's liaison, who has made sure that I had all the information I have needed over the months that have led up to this day.

And last but not least, my great friend Rodney Locks, whom I have gotten to know well over the last few years and who always has a smile and a word of wisdom for me.

Now I have been asked to be brief, and I am going to try, but I cannot make any promises. The theme of this 30th anniversary breakfast for the North Carolina Black Elected Officials as you know is “Remembering our History, Celebrating our Future.”

It’s hard to imagine wrapping all of that up in 15 minutes, but I will do my best.

I just mentioned that this was about remembering “our” history – celebrating “our” future.

Now I say “our,” even though I am not an elected municipal official, I am an appointed official. I used to be a runner – but it is you who have truly run for something and won the post that you hold today. However, I hope you don’t mind me including myself in this talk about “our” history and “our” future, because I know that the only reason I am standing up here today as the Assistant Secretary for the North Carolina Department of Commerce is because of your great organization and those who blazed this trail three decades ago. For that I am both humbled and appreciative.

Now I have to admit something. It has probably been two to three months since I first received a phone call from Ms. Morton about this talk; however, it has only been the last several days that I have spent time preparing my remarks. It wasn't because I wasn't excited – because even as early as it is – I am. It wasn't because I am not used to talking in public – because I am – I get the honor to speak to thousands of people every year, and I enjoy the opportunity to engage. I got off a plane in RDU from Washington, DC late last night just so I could be here this morning, and in a few hours I will be on another plane headed to California. Nothing was going to stand in my way of speaking to you this morning. But instead, I just wasn't sure what value my words could have to an organization and its members who have been trailblazers in the world of politics.

However, on Sunday morning I was sitting in the pews at my church and the pastor's sermon struck a chord with me and gave me the inspiration for my topic today. His topic was "the power of commitment."

The power of commitment struck a chord with me, because I thought back to the history of black elected officials in this state. If you look at the great encyclopedia that has been recently compiled to record the history of North Carolina's black elected officials by your distinguished colleagues Larry Womble, Z. Ann Hoyle and Rodney Locks, we know that there were many blacks elected in both the general assembly and congress during reconstruction as well as a great deal of appointed officials.

But we also know that there were no black elected officials from the end of reconstruction in 1877 until Kenneth R. Williams of Winston-Salem was elected in 1947, seventy years without a black elected leader.

However, since 1947, nearly 50% of the 550 municipalities across the state have elected blacks at one time or another including folks like Henry E. Frye of Guilford County to the State House in 1968 – which we know became a stepping stone to the State Supreme Court, and Frederick Douglass Alexander of Mecklenburg County and John W. Winters Sr., of this county of Wake, both to the State Senate in 1974.

And then in 1981, in Asheville, we know there was a group of black elected officials who declared that it was time to create an organization – this organization – to collectively harness the power of the growing body of black elected officials across the state.

All of those individuals were connected by one thing – the power of commitment. They possessed the power to commit to a vision, to a cause, to a hope.

In the thirty years since the founding of this organization, we have seen membership rise and fall, but we know that those leaders who decided that public service was their calling have never lost the commitment to that vision, cause and hope. They had the power to commit to a life of big problems and little pay. Of meaningful, but sometimes thankless work.

So what does that mean for the future of the organization?

I know that these are challenging times. Local governments around the country have laid off over 30,000 municipal

employees in the last year – and North Carolina is no exception. Tax revenue is down and continues to decline as housing and other property values keep falling. If this was a Dickens novel – it would only seem to be the worst of times. And things are tough all over.

One only needs to walk a short way around Raleigh...and in many other communities around the state, to know that something of a dark cloud still lingers. Many local and state employees saw their long-time friends and co-workers lose their jobs at the end of June. Loss leaves us all feeling a bit more anxious, nervous and uncertain. The world we thought we knew becomes a figment of our imaginations, and we feel as though we are living day to day – not knowing what is just around the corner. In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, that is the bottom of the pyramid, where mere survival is the only goal. Those who are preoccupied only with survival are not able to move beyond that to the other levels of the pyramid such as security, love, education – and the peak of the pyramid – known as self-actualization. Who wants to focus on tomorrow, when you are merely trying to make it through today?

Not very long ago, I had to travel to my hometown of Fayetteville, after learning of the death of a cousin of mine. She was an older cousin, who died after a battle with an illness; so the death wasn't totally unexpected. However, since I had not been informed of the severity of the situation, it was a surprise to me. Loading into my car in the mid-afternoon, I hit the highway and headed home for the wake that evening. I arrived in town a bit before the start of the wake, so I decided to go to the side of town where I grew up. I grew up in "rural" eastern Fayetteville – right next to the tiny town of Vander, Population currently 1,200 – a lot bigger than when I grew up. Returning there is always special for me. But it has been 5 years since I have visited any part of Fayetteville with regularity (though I still have family there), as it was around this time in 2006 when my mother was admitted to Duke Hospital for what we all thought was routine surgery. An anticipated 8 day hospital stay turned into 8 months and ended with my mother's death on a Saturday afternoon in a hospice in Hillsborough as we were preparing to return her to her home in Fayetteville so that she could live out her last days. I was beside her when she died...and I watched her take her last breath. A little

known fact is that my mother's hospice room was next to that of your very own – Senator Jeanne Lucas.

As I rode through east Fayetteville on that recent Monday afternoon, memories of my mother came to me, as did a thousand others from childhood. As I drove up one road, I remembered who used to live there...up another road, I remembered what used to be on that spot....up another road, I couldn't believe such and such still lived there. I drove up the street that I lived on from age 0-4 and remembered the bad kids up the street who used to throw eggs on Halloween. I dodged the mud puddles on the dirt road I grew up on from age 5-15. Those same mud puddles were there when I was a kid. I remembered "Waterville USA," that for at least a couple of summers seemed like it was going to be an economic development anchor for the community but soon closed down. I guess the \$8 entrance fee was too much for the poor community we all grew up in that surrounded it. 25 years later...the gawking towers that once rested on the several acres a couple of miles from my home are totally gone...have been for years...and there is no trace that they ever existed

except for those with a memory that stretches a quarter century.

I visited my elementary school and looked at it with fondness. I looked at the little school with wonderment as two painters prepared it for the upcoming year. I stared at the little grass field where I first started my track career in earnest. I remembered where the cafeteria was, and where every single one of my elementary classrooms were located. It's amazing what the human mind retains.

I'm sure you have little interest in tales of my youth gone by, but the capstone of the evening was after the wake, when my dad led me out to the place where my grandparents lived so long ago and where I visited every single Sunday and summer as a child. Wade, NC, population 489. It had been a literal 30 years since I had been there; not since 1981 – the same year this great organization was founded - when I was 8 years old and my paternal grandfather passed away, prompting my grandmother to relocate to the Fayetteville city limits. Yet the memories came rushing back. I knew I was back home. And it felt good – even if what led to that moment was somber. The

husband of the cousin that passed away even produced an old black and white photo of my grandfather as a young man. I had only known my grandfather as an old, grayed man who had a quarter of his fingers chopped off in a mill accident in his mid-20s, and who had a liking for Wild Irish Rose. In the photo I saw, he was tall, dark and handsome. I marveled at the long ago image because it was a man I had grown up with but in a face and body that I had never seen.

What amazed me during my trip down memory lane on that Monday afternoon was how much the city of Fayetteville itself had changed over the years; yet how much, in some ways, the small surrounding towns had remained the same. No, every single thing didn't look the same from yesteryear, but so much had remained the same – or even gotten worse. I saw the same old houses...some of the same old commercial structures – though they may now house different types of businesses...and I saw the same flow and pace of the community. On one hand, that was so refreshing. On the other hand, it was somewhat depressing. Through several economic booms and busts – those communities were somewhat left untouched...unaffected...un-benefited from it

all. Through dot com bubbles...housing bubbles...the greatest economic expansion in history during the mid-90s. The community stayed still. And so if it stayed still during such a great wealth boom...what is its fate in the second worst economic crisis in American history?

Since these are my memories and my stories, I would be tempted to say that I know none of this means much to you. But I know that is not the case. I know this because I know that many of you have your own stories about your own communities and about what has and what hasn't happened. I head community development for the state, yet I know that community development has let some of you down in the past. Many of you have been great supporters of programs like CDBG, though you might not have always had the opportunity to fully benefit from it.

And in 2011 we took a beating like everyone else at both the state level and the federal level. And current estimates anticipate us taking another major cut this year.

I talked about at least three deaths in my earlier dialogue – my mother, my cousin and my grandfather. And I talked about watching my mother pass away in front of me and taking her last breath – though in some ways she had slowly died over those many months that found her becoming weaker by the day as she stayed in the hospital.

But I am here to tell you today – that community development in North Carolina is not dead yet! And I know that the communities that you all lead are not dead. Yes, we were all wounded during the recent general assembly session...but we ain't dead. And I don't expect any of us to sit in a room and watch our communities die under our watch....we are not going to let any small town take its last breath. We are better than that. We are not only going to survive...we are going to thrive.

How do I know this? Well I know this because as I look out across this room, I see the leadership that is among us.

Although I know what we lost...I also know what remains in this organization – in this great organization of North Carolina black elected officials. I know that we have an organization of fighters - an organization of passionate and caring people who

wake up everyday to serve the greater good. And I know that no one can hold us down if we really put our minds to getting up. I know that it seems dark now...but like the house that is wrecked after a tornado, but maintains its concrete foundation – we can rebuild; and we can rebuild ourselves to be better than the organization that existed before. We can't afford to stay at the bottom of the pyramid living with a day-to-day mentality and struggling to survive. There is a difference between form and substance. Form can change. Substance remains. The history of this organization is of great substance.

I know this may all sound like crazy talk to you considering what we just went through and the overall environment – but it is during these times when the opportunities exists to find the greatness within. We are on the cusp of that greatness. We have so many assets. And you all are our greatest assets. You all have forgotten more than I will ever know about community development....but I think I can bring something to you that perhaps I have a lot more of – the power to believe.

Those who know me best know something interesting about me. I carry few fears in my life. I am not afraid to fail; but I am

not afraid to succeed either. I am not afraid of what people will say about me and I am not afraid to walk to a different drummer. I am not afraid to lead and I am not afraid to follow. However I do harbor one fear...and have so for a lifetime. My biggest fear is unfulfilled potential. That scares me. I don't know anything that is worse than that.

So I like to win. I like to compete. And I love to push my own boundaries and test my own limits.

Somehow, we as an organization have to find that spirit within us. We have to figure out what is going to motivate us on a day-to-day basis to be better at what we do. We as an organization have to find the right motivational cocktail to move us out of the survival mode. We have to have that inner fire to succeed at what we do, or we have to fear that we won't achieve our full potential, or we have to decide that we are not going to disappoint the communities that count on us to serve them or some combination of all of that. There are plenty of people out there that are happy to say that this organization has seen its best days. There are plenty of folks out there that are happy to discount us. We are either going to let those

sentiments hold us down or we are going to use them to lift us up! The choice is ours. I don't know about you...but I chose the latter.

I do want us to achieve self-actualization. It is imperative that we move beyond where we are today to a higher level, which reconnects me with the other part of my story. Those towns I traveled through on that Monday in August that are trapped in the 1960s and 1970s.

If we don't strive to be great as an organization, and if we don't aim to self-actualize, and if we don't attempt to live up to our full potential, then those communities that we serve never will. If we don't do all of those things then they will never achieve their full potential. You know when I said that I fear unfulfilled potential? Well I don't just fear unfulfilled potential for myself. I fear unfulfilled potential for every poor child I see who is first viewed by society as a potential problem, instead of thought of for the potential greatness they could offer to the world. I fear unfulfilled potential of every low-wealth community that folks have written off as dead and gone. In both the child and the

community, I find a reason to believe that if other kids and other communities can be great – then so can they!

In order to help the 500 plus communities in North Carolina succeed, we first have to believe that they can succeed, and we also have to believe that we can be a part of that success. It's going to take us trying new things. So we are going to need patience. Everything that we try as an organization is not going to work out the way we plan – so we have to be able to adapt and go to the next configuration without shame or blame. We have to experiment. Like Stella said, we gotta get our groove back.

I have been here in this position for 15 months now...and I can only account for another 14 or 15 months from now. I don't take anything for granted and without knowing what will happen in November 2012, I have to focus on the circumstances that I can control. The length of my tenure is not one of them. But the priorities I set are. I have a number of priorities that will set the tone for my next year and a half. But one priority that I have is finding a better way for the department of commerce and my community development

division to work with you and your wonderful communities. I told Rodney, let's find a way to work together. Let's find a way to move this state forward. The North Carolina that we live in tomorrow can be better than the one we live in today.

As I rode through the outskirts of Fayetteville, looking at the familiar surroundings, I realized that it really was the "tomorrow" theme in my life that pulled me through. As a child, I decided where I wanted to be "tomorrow"...and that drove my decision making "today." It really is like Orphan Annie says. The beauty is that tomorrow is just a day away; so it always gives us an opportunity to reach for something just beyond our grasp.

When it is all said and done, I want you to know that tomorrow will be better than today not only for the state of North Carolina, but also for all of your communities, and also for the North Carolina Black Elected Municipal Officials. I know that is a tall order. But I also know that it is one that we can achieve because we have the foundational assets to achieve it all...you. When you leave this place, I want you all to know that you made an undeniable difference.

I'm not going to sit around and watch the art of community development die...figuratively or literally. At least while I am here, we will not only fight to survive...but we will fight to thrive. We will pursue impact and we will pursue greatness. And we will do it with energy and passion and commitment and by doing everything we can today to make sure that we can create a better tomorrow. In track and field, we used to have this saying that I am sure that you have all heard at some point which says, "If you can't run with the big dogs...then stay on the porch!" Well, I have to admit that I hope all of you will decide to run with me. And I know you can run. You have run your races and have been successful, which is why you are sitting in this room today.

I told you earlier that I had a reason to believe. For me, my life's journey has been one big reason to believe that anything is possible when you put your heart and mind into it. Each of you has to find your own reason to believe in what we wake up every day to do. I don't need you to believe in me. I don't even need you to believe in yourself. But I need you to believe that tomorrow can be better than today...and I need you to

believe in fulfilled potential. You are all beautiful people, and what you do everyday makes a difference.

Many years ago I came across the term “talitha cumi” in the Bible. It was a term that fascinated me. The scripture it came from is as follows:

And, behold, there cometh one of the rulers of the synagogue, Jairus by name; and when he saw him, he fell at his feet, 23. And besought him greatly, saying, my little daughter lieth at the point of death: I pray thee, come and lay thy hands on her, that she may be healed; and she shall live. 24. And Jesus went with him; and much people followed him, and thronged him....35. While he yet spake, there came from the ruler of the synagogue's house certain which said, thy daughter is dead: why troublest thou the master any further? 36. As soon as Jesus heard the word that was spoken, he saith unto the ruler of the synagogue, be not afraid, only believe. 37. And he suffered no man to follow him, save peter, and James, and John the brother of James. 38. And he cometh to the house of the ruler of the synagogue, and seeth the tumult, and them that wept and wailed greatly. 39. And when he was come in, he saith unto them, why make ye this ado, and weep? The damsel is not dead, but sleepeth. 40. And they laughed him to scorn. But when he had put them all out, he taketh

the father and the mother of the damsel, and them that were with him, and entereth in where the damsel was lying. 41. And he took the damsel by the hand, and said unto her, talitha cumi; which is, being interpreted, damsel, I say unto thee, arise. 42. And straightway the damsel arose, and walked; for she was of the age of twelve years. And they were astonished with a great astonishment. 43. And he charged them straitly that no man should know it; and commanded that something should be given her to eat.'—[Mark 5:22-24, 35-43](#).

I say that there is no reason to cry for community development in the state, no reason to cry for the communities that we serve, and no reason to cry for the North Carolina Black Elected Municipal Officials. We are not dead. Some will say that we are irreparably harmed and hobbled from the actions of the last several months, so why bother. I know they are wrong. We will get up, and we will arise straightway and walk forward. Everyday won't be Christmas...but it can be a day closer to our self-actualization. But we need each other to achieve it. Let's take as many North Carolina communities as possible by the hand and say, "talitha cumi!" Let's astonish the state of North Carolina. And let's do it together. If we have the power to commit like those great leaders before us who ran

and served in office when there was no organization to join. If we have the power to commit like those leaders 30 years ago who first stood this great organization up. If we have the power to recommit and ask the good lord to renew our minds, bodies, and spirits to the principles that first brought us to this work, then nothing can stop us as we march into our next 30 years. Be not afraid...only believe.

I'm going to leave you all with three Italian words that I learned many years ago. Amo. Sogno. Credo.

Amo means "to love." Sogno means "to dream." "Credo" means "to believe."

We must love the communities that we live in. We must dream about how to make them better. And we must believe that we can.

Thanks so much for your attention, congratulations again on the 30th anniversary, and enjoy the rest of the conference.

Thank you.