

Creating the Beloved Community: The Idaho Falls Edition.

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Acknowledgements

Hello everyone {Have them yell, **Good Evening**}, I would now like to acknowledge and thank Dr. Marc Skinner for such a wonderful and humbling introduction. I would also like to acknowledge the Honorable Mayor Casper of Idaho Falls and Honorable Mayor Coletti. It is also a delight to have leaders of the business community such as INL and leaders from the educational space such as the University of Idaho, Idaho Falls. And I would like to say thank you to each and every one of you for being here as it shows the Idaho Falls has a deep commitment to unity.

Of course, I would be remised if I didn't thank Mr. David and Mrs. Eloise Snell and the Idaho Falls African American Alliance for the opportunity to speak at this distinguished Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 17th Annual Banquet here in Idaho Falls. {Ask audience to stand}If you don't know it your community is blessed to have an awesome husband and wife team like the Snell's. They are rare and I would just like to give them their flowers for the model of leadership that they are providing not only to the East Idaho region but to the state at large.

I have enjoyed the hospitality and so appreciated the invitation to be here. Generally, it is said in the Judeo-Christian tradition that a Man or a Woman often goes unhonored in their hometown or area. I am glad to say that is not so in Idaho. Thank you for making me feel welcomed and appreciated.

When invited to give this keynote address, I thought long and hard about what I would speak about. The committee has come up with a great theme "Owning our Past, Creating our Future". While I could take several approaches. Where I thought I could best contribute is to discuss what I have learned as a citizen of Idaho who for nearly a decade has been a part of and leading successful unification efforts both in my town and across the gem state. When you get a moment I would ask you to take a few minutes to look at the display to my left. It is full of information based on the work my team and I from the University of Idaho to unify the university and the Moscow community.

The goal of the talk is for you to leave with practical tools to effect positive change in Idaho Falls that would lead to this wonderful city being a model of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s beloved community.

With that being said last year I created a Labor Acknowledgment, which is a statement that recognizes the economic and cultural contributions that Black people have brought to the state. I now share the statement of [Acknowledgement of African American Labor in Idaho](#). I would respectfully ask for everyone to please stand in respect of this acknowledgement.

We must acknowledge the labor of African Americans who worked and sacrificed to make Idaho the state that it is today. Names like Mr. York, a Black man who functioned as a servant for Lewis & Clark when they arrived in the land, we now call Idaho in 1805. We also acknowledge the labor of a gentleman by the name of George Washington Blackman, a miner who arrived in Hailey, Idaho in 1879. Blackman Peak in the White Cloud Mountain is named after him. We speak the names of the 25th Infantry Regiment, a Black unit who was brought in to put down the labor unrest in the Coeur d'Alene mining district. And lastly, we acknowledge the trailblazer, Ms. Jennie Eva Hughes, the 1st Black graduate of the University of Idaho. May we always acknowledge and never forget these and other faceless and nameless heroes and heroines who have labored and made the state better for their contributions.

Please be seated.

Introduction

If I were to give a title to this brief speech it would be, "Creating the Beloved Community: The Idaho Falls Edition". {Ask to pull out their phone to take notes}

It was Wednesday, March 4th, 2015, around 7:00 p.m. I had just completed a full day of interviews for a faculty position at the Moscow campus of the University of Idaho. Having completed dinner with the chair of my prospective department. She asked if I could hang around for a few moments. Of course, I agreed. It was at this point she told me about some of the troubling history of Northern Idaho. In particular, the former compound of the Arayan Nation in town of Haydyn Lake near the city of Coeur D'Alene where her campus was located. I wasn't worried as I was living in Montgomery, Alabama which was nicknamed the seat of the confederacy. But I appreciated her honesty and forthrightness.

After accepting the offer to live and work at the Moscow campus I asked the department chair to introduce me to as many Black faculty as I could identify online. She did and after talking to several of the faculty members I was reassured that my wife and I were making the right decision to come to the Gem state.

However, it was only after a chance conversation with Ms. Jessica Samuels, the former advisor of the Black Student Union organization, during my first semester at the University of Idaho that my spark related to finding out about the history of Blacks on my campus and my community was ignited. On Friday, December 11, 2015, at 8:01 p.m. Ms. Samuels sent me and other Black faculty and staff documentation that showed that the history of having both a Black Student Union and cultural center went back nearly 50 years. This was amazing information to learn as we found out that Black students were allocated space to gather and congregate and celebrate their cultural heritage from 1971 to 1974.

Over the next several years after seeing Black senior administrators leave. I thought it was important to begin chronicling the contributions of Blacks at the University. Working with student interns such as Brody Gasper, we began to uncover stories within our university's archives that provided a more complete picture of the university's history.

Having been a student of Dr. King's teachings. I had become intrigued by the idea of how my university and local community could become a model of what Dr. King described as the "Beloved Community". According to the King Center, "Dr. King's Beloved Community is a global vision...[where] Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood.

Positioning the university to become a model of a Beloved community was and continues to be important based on the history of the institution. For instance, there has been documented evidence that a staff member in the 1970's who was perceived to be a Ku Klux Klan member was assigned to patrol the Black Student Union/Cultural Center during the times that the University's Black Student Union hosted their meetings in an attempt to try to intimidate Black student leaders. And more recent challenging episodes where Black students have experienced overt racism.

While citizens of my town often talk about the more overt forms of racism that can be found in counties north of Moscow. And perceive the town to be a welcoming community to individuals of all backgrounds, most citizens are not aware that Moscow has been designated a probable "sundown town" that did not want Asians to live in the city in the late 19th and early 20th century. And in 2020, a Black student posted on Facebook that her experience in Moscow was one in which, "I live in a constant state of terror. I exist in this town and my guard is constantly raised."

If any place needed to intentionally work towards embracing the tenants of the Beloved Community it was/is Moscow. Many of our community and university leaders were shocked to learn that Black students and citizens had these experiences and shared these sentiments. Most white citizens felt and continue to feel that our town was and is fairly inclusive and that everyone is treated the same. However, the town and the university had not been intentional about finding out the unique needs and challenges faced by the Black community. It reminds me of the famous Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. statement.

"Whites, it must frankly be said, are not putting in a similar mass effort to reeducate themselves out of their racial ignorance. It is an aspect of their sense of superiority that the white people of America believe they have so little to learn."

— Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., from his book written in 1967: *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*

I share this as a beginning to my remarks because I don't provide my recommendations and strategies as one who lives in a community that is perfect. Or yet has perfected becoming a "Beloved Community". I come as a brother and a fellow Idahoan. Sharing what we have done to "Own Our Past and Create Our Future".

As I think about the wonderful experiences I have had in your beautiful city over the last two days. I am reminded of the positive work that is going on in the city by organizations such as the Idaho Falls bridge builders and their work to help refugees acclimate to this region. Bonneville Youth Development Council is another effort through their drug and substance abuse prevention work helps to position Idaho Falls to become a Beloved Community.

I also am aware that if Idaho Falls is to reach your goal of attracting diverse talent in particular, Black people. You must own your past. You must acknowledge that work needs to be done to create a more inclusive educational environment so that students don't feel comfortable using racially offensive language or local businesses are not sued for racial discrimination or retaliation.

So, the question is, how can we work together to create the "Beloved Community" in Idaho Falls?

Step 1: Own Your Past

The first step is to Own Your Past. From an organizational standpoint what that looked like for the University of Idaho was to commission a study of the history of the contribution of Blacks at the institution. What that looked like for the city of Moscow was for me and my team at the university to partner with our local historical society to engage in a study of history of the Blacks in the city and local vicinity. We actually learned that some Blacks helped homestead and establish these towns.

I also worked with the team at the University of Idaho's Library to publish and share what we learned in university-wide meetings, events, and on the institution's website. The goal was to ensure that we not only educated the university community, but it would become a part of the history that was and is shared internally and publicly about the institution. It is my hope that being intentional in this way will lead to an inclusive narrative of all of the contributions of members of our university community. We have begun to replicate this model with the city of Moscow, and we are seeing positive results. We have partnered with the Latah County Historical Society to launch a webpage that shares the history and current contributions of Blacks to the city and local vicinity. These simple approaches that I can envision the city of Idaho Falls and the business community engaging in to create an inclusive environment for all citizens.

Lastly, when seeking to "Own our past", we not only as a university community and city leaders share an inclusive historical narrative. We share and assess the historical barriers that keep us from becoming the Beloved Community we are desiring to be.

The watch words for this year are "intentionality" and "accountability". So, while we own our past both positive and challenging, we have to be intentional if we are to create our future. So, as

I close, I want to share with you a few ways in which I am working with my city and university to create a future of Moscow so that it becomes a Beloved Community.

Step 2: Create Your Future

First, my team at the Black Research Institute for Flourishing and Thriving identified best practices and people who had engaged in similar initiatives. In the case of the university, we brought together experts from around the country who had engaged in similar initiatives to share best practices. And we found the following recommendations to be most helpful.

- Funding initiatives that would lead to greater inclusion, such as cultural events.
- Creating partnerships between city and businesses. Public/private partnerships are key to ensuring the interest of everyday citizens and business leaders and help shape a positive future for the community.
- Checking with underrepresented communities to ensure you are meeting their needs.
- Not assuming because someone is a person of color they are qualified and willing to take on such responsibilities.

So, I am humbled to have been given the opportunity to share what I have learned so far about “Owning the past and Creating the Future”. Of particular concern, focusing on the needs and perspectives of those most underrepresented and privileged look forward to the rest of our conversation where we can engage further about what that might look like in Idaho Falls.

Thank you!