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Winter December, 2010

# Include, Invest, Inspire

Effenus Henderson



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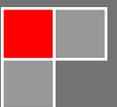
2010

# Include, Invest, Inspire

Equal Opportunity Banquet, Urban League of Nebraska, Remarks by Effenus Henderson

Effenus Henderson is Chief Diversity Officer for Weyerhaeuser Company, Federal Way, Washington, and also serves as President, Council of Affiliate Board Members and a member of the Board of Trustees for the National Urban League

December 3, 2010  
Weyerhaeuser  
1/1/2010



# Include, Invest, Inspire

2010 Equal Opportunity Luncheon  
Urban League of Nebraska  
Omaha, Nebraska

**Remarks by Effenus Henderson  
December 3, 2010**

Ms. Thomasina Skipper, Board Chair, Mr. Thomas H. Warren, President and CEO, Urban League of Nebraska, board members, staff, Guild, Young Professionals, Corporate and Community Partners and Friends, I am deeply honored and privileged to speak to you today at your annual EOD banquet. I also want to congratulate the Nebraska Affiliate and the National Urban League movement in this Centennial Celebration year.

As Chief Diversity Officer for Weyerhaeuser Company, and as a member of the National Urban League Board of Trustees progress in the civil rights journey has been an inclusive progress, led by inclusive leaders, who made a personal investment in the struggle, and who inspired countless others to do the same. Many paid the ultimate sacrifice in this struggle, even here in Nebraska.

In Omaha, several notable leaders have spent time here and challenge the nation and this community to do better. I think of Malcolm X, Whitney Young, Ernie Chambers, and Gale Sayers, among others. They helped break down walls of segregation, inequality and disrespect. Like the Fighting Tenth Cavalry of the Buffalo Soldiers who roamed Midwest, they were warriors for change.

The journey for equality and freedom started with such early Nebraska African American settlers and cowboys as members of the Moses Speese and Henry Webb families. All were former slaves and took the name of their former owners.

When I think of the relationship of Corporate America, 100 Black Men, the Urban League and countless other organizations I think of family. I think of Inclusion.

Growing up in North Carolina during the 50s and 60s family was very important. Extended families worked and helped each other. It was the way we learned to cope with inadequate educational systems, broken families and homes, and few job opportunities. Nevertheless, during that era we worked together in positive ways to improve our lot as a race of people.

Relatives, preachers, teachers, mechanics, farmers, and our friends looked out for each other; we knew that each one had the other's back. When one family was in need, as when my mother would run out of sugar she would say: "Son, go down to Miss Rosie's house and ask if

we could borrow a cup of sugar.” I would. And Mrs Rosie would be happy to share what she had.

She was like so many caring neighbors, friends, and teachers. They understood that their survival and advancement was inextricably bound to mine. And mine to theirs. Sharing released a feeling of pride and mutual respect for one another. It was critical to our survival.

Her actions were probably a lot like the pioneering efforts of Eugene Willis Skinner and others here in Omaha who fought for quality education for African American boys and girls.

And yes, corn played a part of major part in my journey. As a child with little money, my father would make us gather corn that had been left behind in the corn field. We were “corn huskers.” It was our way of making money to buy Christmas gifts and toys. Our father emphasized working hard for the things we wanted in life. Even though we were very poor, our father never took public assistance, he believed, in spite of personal difficulties, that it was better to work hard than to accept public charity.

So as I look back on my journey and reflect on where I have come from, I realize my success and professional humility is grounded in the principles of “Include, Invest, and Inspire!” - The theme for this banquet.

It rings eloquently in the slogan of the National Urban League’s Centennial Celebration – “I am empowered.”

This slogan so eloquently delivered by our NUL President Marc Morial, was not recently invented. It was woven in the fabric of the civil rights struggle. Beginning with the National Urban League founders, who wanted to improve the lot of African Americans, “Inclusion” has been a mantra for progress.

Helen Keller once said: “Alone we can do so little, together we can do so much.” Her poignant words remind me of a major “moment of truth” in my own childhood. Let me share some of the story.

I grew up poor. I am one of twelve siblings born to Horace and Katie Henderson in rural Wayne County, North Carolina. I was the fifth oldest child. In the eighth grade and 13 years old, I learned that my mother was diagnosed with Lupus. She had been sick for a few years and was frequently hospitalized for her illness. In spite of her feebleness and illness she had a strong spirit and love of family. She had big dreams for us. I recall how sick she was when she mustered up enough energy to attend my eighth grade graduation ceremonies. As I gazed out in the crowd, the proudest thing to see was my family and my mother in particular, seated in the audience.

For you see, it does mean a lot to a child to see his or her parents at a major life event and milestone. Family is part of the inclusion paradigm and always has been.

A few weeks later, my father would share with us that my mother was not doing well and that she might not be with us much longer. It was a shocking revelation and one that at the time, I couldn't fully comprehend.

Several months later, my mother was taken to the hospital and I was left to help care for my younger siblings with a special responsibility for my youngest brother, then just a day short of a year old.

Before my mother left for the hospital, she called me into her room. While there, she told me she wanted me to hold something for her until she returned. She pointed me to a spot where she had secretly hidden a dainty handkerchief knotted in one corner. Inside that corner was money that she had saved.

Nineteen dollars and a few pennies. All the wealth my mother owned. But it was lot of money to her.

She asked me to keep her money. I felt special and was humbled. I did not understand the power that this symbolic moment would have in my life. I believe she was "investing" in me by sharing her meager resources.

Friends would drop by and often share a dollar, a quarter, a dime to help my mother who did not work outside the home. They knew how difficult times were for our family and they knew that "mama" could use the help.

In the corporate world one of the aspects of inclusion is building trust, expanding circles of influence, demonstrating commitment, and providing opportunity for growth and development. As a child I witnessed a community inspired to help a struggling to help a family in need.

A few days later she slipped into a coma and died. I was staying with my mother's aunt that week helping tend to my one year old brother. My aunt went to see my mother the day before she died and told me that I needed to go see her and I did. When I entered her hospital room, I saw her under an oxygen tent with her eyes turned upwards. I couldn't get the courage to speak. I was so afraid. No she couldn't die; we had just celebrated my brother's first birthday, the day before. It was if she had used her last ounce of strength to live through that day.

I left the hospital to return home to be with my brothers and sisters. As soon as we walked inside our house, the phone rang. Mama had died.

No one knew that Mama had given me her money, but what I knew at that moment was that I couldn't keep it any longer. I gave it to my father. I told him that she asked that I keep it. I told him that I thought that he needed it now. Little did I know that as I gave it to him I was

making an investment in family? I could have selfishly held on to it but I realized there was a higher purpose to be served, and that was to help the family.

I often look back on that moment with its powerful lesson. That no matter what lies ahead, that “together we can.” I believe that we must inclusively reach out, make an investment in others and inspire those more fortunate to continue to give.

Gale Sayers, who grew up in Omaha once said: *“Our young people look up to us. Let us not let them down. Our young people need us. Saving them will make heroes of us all”*. We must invest in them. They are our future. One recent report states that Nebraska has the third-highest black homicide rate in the nation. In Omaha gangs, guns, and black on black youth violence are at the center of black homicide issues.

I congratulate the 100 Black Men of Omaha and their efforts to invest in our youth. We simply must do more.

So my mother realized that her husband, Horace had to invest in each of us. She instructed my father, still young and just turning forty, to keep all of the children together if she died. In fact she asked him to promise her that he would. He agreed and gave a solemn promise on her death bed. It was a promise he would keep.

This was a period in my life that I learned about community and family. It was a time I learned about caring. It was a time I learned of giving priority to the greater good. Yet, it was also a time in my life when I encountered heartache, doubt, anger and frustration for what was happening to our family.

I didn't feel inclusive, I felt forsaken and excluded. I didn't feel like I was an investment but something to ignore and a burden on society. I didn't feel inspired; I felt the deep despair of hopelessness. I was afraid, that my father, like many other black fathers would abandon us too.

But it was a time when my father, a proud but unassuming Black man would pull us together to say “together we, as a family can.” Friends and community members would pitch in to help us through our growing up years. He was a father who did not abandon his fate; he stood by to build it.

I am reminded of the quote by Mother Teresa when she said: “None of us, including me, ever do great things. But we can all do small things, with great love, and together we can do something wonderful.”

The task before my father and our family was a hefty one but we realized that it would be easier when we all pitched in. I am reminded of what Homer said: Light is the task where many share the load.”

Yet for a while, I grew bitter. I lost my faith. I questioned God. How could a God take away our mother at such a critical time in our lives? The storm was raging. Times were tough. Food was scarce. Just where was Jesus? Where was God? I think I was feeling like Senator Ernie Chambers when he filed his lawsuit against God a few years back in Omaha when he said: God has caused "calamitous catastrophes resulting in the wide-spread death, destruction and terrorization of millions upon millions of the Earth's inhabitants including innocent babes, infants, children, the aged and infirm without mercy or distinction."

Yet I came to trust God later.

Reflecting on my pain and suffering at that time, I am reminded of the frustration of the disciples, in Luke Chapter 8, when they were in the boat with Jesus and the storms were raging. Jesus was asleep. They were about to panic when they decided to wake him. When they did, He asked them "where is your faith?" I am reminded of a quote: "The teacher does speak when the student is taking the test. I now know that my family's faith was being tested.

Faith and integrity is an important lever for success. *"I'm for truth, no matter who tells it. I'm for justice, no matter who it is for or against. I'm a human being, first and foremost, and as such I'm for whoever and whatever benefits humanity as a whole."* Malcolm X.

I later regained my faith and realized that perhaps there is a testimony, some lessons and yes, a story in my family's journey. I have come to accept God's purpose for my life and now understand the story.

Yes my faith and my religion became my inspiration. My faith and religion became my anchor in a time of real need.

It is a story of caring, of sharing, of hope, of opportunity, and one of pain. It is a story that through it all he is there with us. It is a message that in spite of what we might be going through in life, we all will encounter pain and sorrow, but that "together we can" make it. We only need to throw out the life line to others, especially to those less fortunate -- Especially the struggle of our youth here in Omaha.

Life lessons have come out of my journey. Like the long and often embittered journey of recently retired Nebraska State Senator Ernie Chambers when he said "I do it because I believe in it." It is often through personal tenacity and passion that change comes. Such values are an important lesson in bringing about needed change.

Such lessons have guided my wife Helen, my children – Kevin, Justin, and Marcus since that time. It has guided their wives as well. These lessons are about moving forward, of advancing in life. We stand and advance on the shoulders of those who have come before us.

These lessons help illustrate the meaning of the words "empowerment and equality" which are a cornerstone of the legacy of Whitney Young and the National Urban League. I am reminded

of a Whitney Young quote: “It is better to be prepared for an opportunity and not have one than to have an opportunity and not be prepared.”

So what are the lessons?

**The first lesson is about our individual gifts.** Paul, in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians Chapter 12 talks about our different gifts. Paul refers to gifts of healing, of wisdom, of different forms of service, discernment, and other attributes. I have learned that the key is using our individual gifts for the greater good and for nurturing and developing those that will come after us – our children and grandchildren.

In today’s world, this lesson speaks to diversity. We all bring our unique characteristics and skills to our workplace, to our families, and our communities. The key is how we harness this diverse power in an inclusive approach to solving issues and problems in our daily lives.

The question is “Do we shun or embrace those who are different?” Do we behave inclusively or exclusively?

**The second lesson is about setting expectations.** My mother set an expectation and goal for my father - To keep us all together. In order accomplish that goal, we had to work together. My father couldn’t do it alone. So we were all assigned tasks and expected to accomplish them. My father was a disciplinarian so there were stern consequences for not putting forth the effort to complete the task.

In life there are consequences for not doing you best. It is all about personal choice and the decisions we make. A strong leader and faith can and does inspire others to excel.

**The third lesson is about working hard.** Nothing in life comes easy. If it does, question its value. Oftentimes success is multi-generational. The ultimate success we aspire to may not come to us in our generation but may be a blessing to our children and generations to come. Remember, we stand on the shoulders of those who came before us. It is about an invest in the future.

I am reminded of King David in his quest to construct a temple to house the “Arch of the Covenant.” He paved the way but Solomon, his son, completed the task. This story, told in the book of Kings also talks about the trials and tribulations that Solomon encountered after accomplishing a measure of success. It also speaks to the team work needed to construct the temple and how he sought out those with appropriate skills for the job. It also reminds us that success is fleeting.

My wife and I worked tirelessly to raise our three sons. A key part of our strategy was keeping them busy. They were expected to get good grades and to go to church, and they were involved in a number of wholesome activities like scouting, sports, and music. There were times when they wanted to stop participating when they were close to accomplishing a key

goal but we set an expectation that they finish what they start. As a result, they all graduated with honors, all attained Eagle rank in scouting, and all went on to pursue careers.

All three graduated from Morehouse College in Atlanta. When asked how did we raise such great kids, we tell those who ask that we made them work hard, expected them to give back to the community, and we didn't let failure become an option. When my wife and I left our families back on the east coast and moved to Federal Way, Washington, all we had was our small family unit. We had no choice but to work together and to trust in God.

I am reminded of a quote by Margaret Mead when she said: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

I want to salute the work of the 100 Black Men's organization. For many young boys and girls, they become the family they never had. They provide the inspiration that leads to feelings of inclusion and inspiration. They help nurture the investment in our youth. Thanks for what you do.

**The fourth lesson is about faith.** Hebrew 11: 1 says that faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen. Faith is not a solid object that we can reach out and touch. It is not even an earthly concept. It is more a state of mind. It is our point of view. Faith is developed and refined. It is like the fermentation of yeast when you make bread. It rises to gigantic proportions supernaturally. That is faith. We don't quite know how the bread rose... all we know is that it did.

Faith teaches us that life is a journey. It is a constant process of learning, developing, growing and changing. It teaches us to persevere, to hope and hold on. Faith is a critical part of trust, love and caring. We must maintain a healthy respect for, trust and faith in our fellow mankind to advance.

I am thankful for the many corporate leaders and organizations that helped to open doors to the underrepresented. As those of us enter those hallowed halls of corporate America we must remember to work hard, be a team player, and seek to be inclusive. I thank the corporate partners represented here today.

**The fifth lesson is about accountability.** We have to hold ourselves accountable for our success. Henry Ford once said: "Whether you think you can or whether you think you can't, you are probably right."

A senior executive at Weyerhaeuser recently said: "Whether you prevail or fail, endure or die, depends more on what you do to yourself than on what the world does to you."

I recall when each of my kids turned thirteen of buying them a gold necklace with a cross. I sat down with each of them and told them how special they were and that as they enter their teen

years, they would be faced with a lot of choices. We explained that “your mother and I will not always be around to guide you, but that if you follow the teaching of Jesus and call upon him in times of despair and disappointment that you can overcome, endure and yes even prosper”. And, you will make the right choice.

I didn’t realize how much they would treasure this gift as they entered their teenage years. Too many of our black men and boys are in prison because they didn’t feel love, didn’t have good mentors, and of bad choices. We have to embrace our youth and make them feel special.

The key principles behind accountability are taking responsibility, building genuine and authentic relationships, being reliable and doing what you said you would do, and promising and delivering what you said through disciplined execution.

**The sixth and final lesson is about Leadership and Civility.** Leadership is about telling your story. Our obligation is to “care to share.” If you have a dream, build a dream team. People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care. When a great leader has done his / her job people will say – we did it ourselves.”

I recall sitting down when each of our sons turned eighteen and writing them a personal letter. I framed each letter and presented it to them as their gift. I explained to each of them how much their mother and I loved them and to call on us at anytime that were in despair. I reinforced that as a family unit we can overcome difficult challenges together. Too many parents neglect and shun their children. We have embraced ours. I drew this lesson from my father.

I would observe him, a man who worked each day from 6 a.m. in the morning till 11 p.m. each night on two or more jobs to support us. He expected each of us to do our part, and if we didn’t there were consequences.

I recalled his nightly dedication to God. Through the lamp light peering from his bedroom when he returned at night, we would see him reading the bible and gaining strength from scripture. His favorite scripture was the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalms. “Yeah though I walk through the valley of death, I shall fear no evil.”

He taught us to step outside our comfort zone and to embrace those different from ourselves, to help the afflicted and the handicapped and above all to be civil to others. Matt 25:40 Says: And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done [it] unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done [it] unto me.

At the heart of embracing others is mutual respect and brotherly love.

My father would turn in his grave if we pulled a public “display like we have seen by many leaders recently.” He would say you have to keep your emotion in check. He would say for whom much is given, much is expected. He would expect us to be civil.

He would find the outburst by South Carolina Congressman Joe Wilson during President Obama's speech to Congress in very poor taste and extremely disrespectful. He would say, "There is a time and place for everything."

My father would seek to understand Professor Gates and the Police Officer in their altercation. He taught us to respect authority, to speak when spoken to, and to not feel more highly of yourself than you ought. He taught us that "together we can make a difference." But more importantly, he taught us to be civil, even to those we consider our adversaries.

And so today, the message is still clear. We have to work as a team, reach beyond our comfort zone and embrace difference. We must bring back civility and mutual respect to our families, to civil rights and inclusion efforts. It continues to be a matter of survival and a key investment in our future...

The key to the advancement of each one of us, to the Urban League and civil society as a whole, will be in the way we engage others in constructive strategies to close the gaps and solve mutually beneficial problems.

Yes we can include. Yes we can invest. Together, we can inspire Omaha and the Nation to do better.

Thank you.

Effenus Henderson  
December 3, 2010