

Ohio Supreme Court Justice Yvette McGee Brown

Excerpts from MLK Assembly Speech

January 13, 2012, at Columbus Academy

Martin Luther King makes us think about what it means to have character. He often said that the measure of a person is not where they stand in times of comfort and convenience but where they stand in times of chaos and controversy. As he so eloquently put it, "When you are called upon to right injustice you will never remember the words of your enemies, but you will always remember the silence of your friends."

Sometimes we make him bigger than life... but he was an ordinary person who was called on by history to do extraordinary things. When he was your age, he was a kid just like you. He had two parents. He went to a regular school. He imagined he would follow in the footsteps of his father and his grandfather and become a minister. He would sit in assemblies just like you are now and never imagine that one day he would be called to greatness, or that one day he would have a holiday in his honor or a monument in Washington, D.C. He was simply an ordinary man.

Today is not just thinking about the past. It's really thinking about what is the environment you as Columbus Academy students want to create not just in your world but create right here in your school. The reality is it's never too early to think about the person you are going to be... Who you are on the inside is the character that matters. Think about who you are, the voice you want to have, and what you want to say. It doesn't matter where you started life, it matters where you finish. If you are willing to drill down and really take advantage of the great education you have here... there is no excuse for you not to make a great contribution to this world because you have been given all of the tools by your parents, by the teachers in this school and by the school community to be great.

So what did Martin Luther King do? He refused to look over injustice. He refused to ignore those things that make others uncomfortable. He could have simply said, "This is not my problem." But what made him great is that he stood up and he dared to make a difference. He was willing to sacrifice time and family and friends. He was willing to create enemies. But he was unwilling to be silent. He once said that we are all caught up in a run of inescapable mutuality: what impacts one impacts us all. "I could never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be." That is the interrelated structure of reality.

We need for you to be bold. We need for you to be prepared to make a difference and to understand that it's not just about the paycheck that you receive. I'm going to ask you – particularly those of you who are looking at college over the next couple of years – to not just think about how you can be financially successful but to think about how you can be significant. Think about how you're going to contribute to the world because success is about you and significance is about others.

We really need you to come in, to roll up your sleeves and be committed to making a difference. It will happen here. It needs to happen now because the world we are leaving you is complex. Technology is opening doors that make use more interconnected and sometimes can make ethics seem situational. The same technology that makes our world small changes at a rapid pace and is obsolete in months. But of greater concern to me for your generation is that the Kardashians pass for real talent, that reality TV

shows are seen as art, and that young women go on “The Bachelor” thinking they can find a husband. I really need you to resist the idiocy of television these days and to spending more time developing your mind. I really want you to stretch yourself outside of your comfort zone. I really want you to be bold. I want you to dare to make a difference. I want you to be non-conformist and to challenge this world to live up to this Constitution that we’ve had for over 235 years that all people are created equal, and each one of you has a hand in making that true. I want you to surround yourself with people who are different than you. I want you to surround yourself with people who have different opinions than you, people who think differently, because through that process you become a whole human being. Dare to be around people who challenge you, who think you’re not so great and who think you’re not right all the time. I promise you will get more from them than you give.

When you leave this assembly, please don’t leave thinking about Martin Luther King only as somebody from the past. Think about the values that he espoused. Think about who you’re going to be. I want you to think about if you were in Martin Luther King’s place back in 1955 when Rosa Parks sat on that bus, would you have had the courage to stand up. What are you going to do when history calls on you to do something great. Are you really prepared to stand up for what you believe in. It’s easy to espouse words, but it takes courage to stand for conviction. So I want to dare you and challenge you to be that person. Make our world better than we left you because, believe me, we as adults are counting on you.