

MLK Corporate Community Lunch

April 5, 2007

I want to begin with a brief personal reflection. In 1963 I was living here in Rochester and was a sophomore in high school. At some point, I read a story that profoundly affected me even as a teenager. A family bought a house about a mile from where we lived and when the neighbors learned that the family was black they tried to buy the house instead. The black family eventually prevailed but the story angered me and so I joined a group known as CORE, the Congress on Racial Equality, which was headed by Hannah Storrs, a woman some of you may remember.

In the summer of 1963, the summer between my sophomore and junior years, I learned about a planned demonstration in Washington in support of the civil rights movement and that CORE would be sending busloads of marchers. I decided to travel with our group to the rally. On Aug. 28th we stood at the base of the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and heard the Rev. Martin Luther King deliver his “I Have a Dream Speech”, one of the most famous speeches in the history of our country. Following the speech, more than 250,000 people joined hands singing anthems from the civil rights movement. It was a moment that had a profound effect on my life. On the long bus ride back to Rochester,

I decided that I wanted to attend law school and that I wanted to be a civil rights lawyer. It was a personal decision to do what little I could to make a difference in the quality of the lives of others. Even after I moved from law practice to teaching, I tried to use the opportunities to speak out about matters that mattered—issues of discrimination and poverty; issues that at bottom are about our failures to treat others with equal respect and concern.

So, I am especially pleased to have been asked to speak today at this luncheon. It is indeed an honor.

In thinking about what to say today I was reminded of something I wrote almost two years ago. At that time I was living and teaching in NYC, and was a regular passenger on the subways. After one ride to my office, I wrote the following:

“Excuse me,” a hoarse voice said to the passengers on the crowded subway car. “Excuse me. I’m sorry for interrupting. But, I am homeless and haven’t had a real meal in three days. I am so hungry. Please look into your hearts and give me a few cents so I can get some food. Thank you and God bless.”

I have heard a similar speech every time I have taken a subway in New York City. But, today, my thoughts were new and different. As the homeless person made her way through the car, I was reading the news articles about the extraordinary efforts to ensure that a single individual, Terri Schiavo, continued receiving

government funded nourishment. The Senate meets in a midnight session. Both Houses pass an unusual bill designed to protect this individual. The President rushes back to Washington to sign the legislation. Prayer vigils are held on Terri's behalf.

My thoughts at the moment were not critical of those extending such efforts on behalf of one person. I'll let others question the legitimacy of federal governmental intrusion into matters that are almost always left to the families or the states.

No, my thoughts were much more about an appeal to the supporters of Terri Schaivo-- to Senator Frist, to Congressman DeLay, to President Bush, and to the well meaning people praying for Terri. You apparently have the ability to organize the entire federal government to make sure that one person gets adequate daily nourishment. Why not use the current momentum and your power to ensure adequate food for all the millions of American citizens who go to bed hungry each night?

I started imagining prayer demonstrations outside the Capitol and the White House. The same folks demonstrating on behalf of Terri now would be demanding that the government ensure similar treatment for all who need nourishment. I imagined the House and Senate leaders stressing that the right to life at times may require the government to provide the means to obtain the nourishment needed to sustain that life. I even imagined a President saying that

he would fly back to Washington from anywhere in the world to sign such legislation.

Senator Frist apparently said that the Schiavo case is unusual because she is still alive and her circumstances focus on the sanctity of human life. Well, the homeless woman on my subway car, like the millions of others without adequate daily food, is also still alive, certainly more so than one in a persistent vegetative state. And her life is no less deserving of sanctity. In this respect, Terri's plight is really not unusual. Of course, Terri has a name and face while the woman on the subway and the millions like her are nameless and faceless. But, if faces and names are all that is needed, I am sure we can get them. (Pause)

I was reminded of this piece because Rev. King devoted his life to the job of giving names and faces to people like that woman on the subway. As you know, he was deeply concerned about economic as well as racial injustice, two interrelated evils. It would likely not surprise anyone in this room that the woman on my subway car was not only poor but also black. Rev. King once made an observation that seems to relate directly to my subway story. "True compassion," he said, "is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. [True compassion]

comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.”

We live in a time when it seems outdated to talk about economic injustice. We read in the headlines about all the new billionaires in the country and world but rarely see stories about poverty. Yet it is very much a part of our lives even if it does not capture front page headlines. Poverty is too much a part of the lives of families in our own city. In 2005, 30 % of the households in the City of Rochester had incomes below the poverty level. From 1999 to 2005, the number of food assistance cases in Rochester rose 40 %.

Most disturbing we have seen a rise in the rate of poverty among children. Since 2000, the number of children living in poverty in the United States grew and today 13 million children—over 17% of all children in this country—live in poverty. In Rochester the poverty rate for children is a startling and disturbing 37%. Nearly two fifths of our children live in poverty and we have the horrible distinction of being the 11th poorest city in the nation.

The statistics should not obscure the day to day human costs of child poverty. A report from the Children’s Defense Fund described the human impact in the following way:

“Poverty stacks the odds against children before birth and decreases their chances of being born healthy and of normal birth weight or of surviving; it stunts their physical growth and slows their educational development; frays their family bonds and supports; and increases their chances of neglect or abuse. Poverty wears down their resilience and emotional reserves; saps their spirits and sense of self; crushes their hopes; devalues their potential and aspirations; and subjects them over time to physical, mental, and emotional assault, injury, and indignity. Poverty even kills.”

Dr. King once observed that “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.” The elimination of child poverty matters, and it matters deeply. If we truly believe in the King legacy, we should not—indeed we cannot-- remain silent about the way poverty impacts children in our community. I should stress that this is not a partisan political issue. Elimination of child poverty is not a Republican or Democratic issue. Rather it is both a humanitarian issue and a very practical one as well. We need to ensure that our children have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to become productive members of the community. We all benefit from that goal.

King underscored this point when he wrote in his book Where do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community (481): “In a real sense, all life is interrelated. The agony of the poor impoverishes the rich; the betterment of the poor enriches the rich. We are inevitably our brother’s keeper because we are our brother’s brother. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.”

So, I want to suggest that in the year 2007 there is no better way to celebrate the life and work of Dr. King than to call the question: “Are we ready to eliminate child poverty in the Rochester community and create equal opportunities for all our children?”

To break the cycle of poverty we must ensure that all our children are getting adequate nourishment, health care and education. I know the education field best and let me give you a few more statistics. The high school graduation rate in the City of Rochester is less far than 50 %

- a. and we know that without a proper education our children become trapped in the poverty cycle
- b. for those who do not complete high school, the national unemployment rate is 9% and for those employed the average income is \$19,000

- c. for those with a high school diploma, the unemployment rate drops to 5% and the average income jumps 50% to over 28,000
- d. for those with a bachelor's degree, the unemployment rate is 3% and the average income is over 51,000.
- e. The import of these statistics is clear—we need to ensure that our children graduate from high school and are able to obtain a college degree.

If we are serious about combating child poverty and guaranteeing a bright future for all our children we need a community wide effort that brings together businesses, the schools, the community agencies, and the government. We need a real partnership among those sitting in this room today.

I should note that there is reason for cautious optimism. We have some programs that are working. The Hillside Work Scholarship Program, for example, provides work, education, and life skills to nearly 1500 students in the City schools. And the program is a tremendous success. Its students graduate at nearly twice the overall graduation rate for the city schools. Recently, the Program added a new component, and started ensuring that the students get adequate medical care. We must find ways to expand the number of students involved in the Hillside Work Scholarship program.

Another bright spot is the work of the many colleges in the region. We all have programs that assist children in the Rochester schools. I am sure you will forgive me if I focus on the Nazareth contributions. In addition to the superb undergraduate and graduate curricular programs offered by our School Education, we have many extra curricular ties with the schools. We have a Partners for Learning program in which over 100 of our students assist children in the city schools. We also started a tutoring program for participants in the Hillside Program. We will be working with the Rochester City Schools to create a math and science high school. Because we know the value of a college education, this year we announced that Nazareth would select 10 students in each entering class to be Rochester City School District Scholars. Each of these students will receive a \$10,000 a year scholarship for each of 4 years. Once the program is fully operating we will have 40 RCSD scholars and, more importantly, we will have created hope for these students as well as their children and future generations. Such scholarships, indeed, have a ripple effect across generations.

Another hopeful beginning is the Rochester Children's Zone. Superintendent Rivera announced that the plan is intended to (quote) "improve the health, wellness, education, and livelihoods of students and families in the neediest section of Rochester." The "Rochester Children's Zone" involves a partnership among people

from health, welfare, public safety, housing, education, literacy, employment, and social services. It is intended to improve student achievement and graduation rates, the well-being of families, the involvement of parents, and the revitalization of neighborhoods. Dr, Rivera added, “It is incumbent on all of us to provide the “surround care” to support our children and families 24/7. For our students to learn, grow, and develop, we must work collaboratively to combat the impact of poverty and the shadow it casts on our children’s futures.” (end quote)

These efforts and others, however, are only a beginning. So, I call the question: “Are we ready to eliminate child poverty in the Rochester community and create equal opportunities for all our children?” Let us today commit to celebrate not MLK Day but MLK Year, a year in which we work together toward the end of reducing the effects of child poverty. It will take more than a year, of course. But, my hope is that next year the speaker will be able to say that we have made progress toward that goal

One of Dr. King’s central concepts was the idea of a beloved community. The King Center states (and I quote) “Dr. King’s Beloved Community is a global vision, in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth. In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because international

standards of human decency will not allow it. Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood.” Dr. King stated, “ I do not think of political power as an end. Neither do I think of economic power as an end. They are ingredients in the objective that we seek in life. And I think that end of that objective is a truly brotherly society, the creation of the beloved community.”

If we are serious about working toward creating that beloved community then we must begin with a commitment to address the issues of child poverty in our own community. Such a commitment would be a true recognition and celebration of all that Dr. King lived for and died for.

I call the question. Thank you.