THE ACHIEVEMENTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF

BLACK WOMEN

FOR

TERESA TOWNSEND

REVISED

Hello everyone, I am Teresa Townsend and I am honored to be here today to speak with all of you about a subject very close to **my** heart and I am sure yours as well. This month, as with every February, we celebrate Black History Month. Every day of the year I am grateful for who I am, where I’ve come from and to be a part of the fiber of our society, and every February, I am touched and humbled by the acknowledgement given and received by those around us as we all recognize who we are and the journey we’ve taken. I am proud to be an African American. I am proud of my military service and contribution. I am proud to be part of a wonderful family. And I am REALLY proud to be a strong, vibrant, caring Black Woman!! I am particularly thrilled to share whatever I can about the achievements and accomplishments of black women throughout history. I don’t know how many of you have heard this, but Maya Angelou once said, “How important it is for us to recognize and celebrate our heroes and our **SHE-ROES**!!!” Thank you Maya, what a wonderful word that is!! Let’s face it; she should know-she’s one of the great **SHE-ROES** of modern culture!

**CELEBRATING PAST ACHIEVEMENTS**

From as far back as we can tell, black women have been an integral part of humanity and civilization. Let’s face it, it may seem kind of simple, but none of us would be here without the contribution, suffering and sheer strength of women! Really… think about it. It’s hard to go very far back in recorded black history, because so much wasn’t preserved, but we do know that female slaves made significant contributions to the households in which they served. It really does seem that, no matter where we are placed, no matter how much oppression we faced, the indomitable spirit of the female comes through. I’d like to share some stories of the achievements of remarkable black women with you today.

She was born in Senegal in 1753 and was sold into slavery as an 8-year-old girl. She was sent off to North America on a ship called the Philis and she was sold to the Wheatley family of Boston to be a servant for Susanna, Mrs. Wheatley. The young girl was given the name Philis Wheatley and was rather lucky to have been placed in such a progressive family. Mary, one of the Wheatley’s daughters, tutored young Phillis, who exhibited rather impressive aptitude. She was given lessons in Latin and Greek classics. By the time she became a young lady of around 20, she had started to write poems, and in particular, she had written one for President George Washington. Word of her talent spread from Boston to London and many believed her to be the most famous female poet of the 18th century. Here are some lines from her poem, “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” as they provide us with a rare view “from the eyes of one who has been there”

“Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,

Taught my benighted soul to understand

That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:

Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.

Some view our sable race with scornful eye,

"Their colour is a diabolic dye."

Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,

May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.”

And what can we say about a remarkable woman named Sojourner Truth? She started life named Isabella in 1797 in upstate New York. She, too, was sold into slavery as a child of 7 years old, but clearly destiny had other plans for her. In 1826, she became a free woman and answered the calling, or the “voices” she heard and became a tireless crusader for not only the abolitionist movement, but also the women’s suffragist movement that built up momentum in the mid-19th century. She has been credited with freeing hundreds of slaves and was a woman who spoke her mind, “loud and proud.” We can thank Sojourner for saying, at the Women’s Convention in Akron, Ohio,

“Ain’t I a woman? Then they talk about this thing in the head; what's this they call it? [Someone reminds her it is "intellect"] That's it, honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or Negroes' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full?”

We’ve all learned about Harriett Tubman. She was a staunch abolitionist, credited with having facilitated the escape of hundreds of slaves through the Underground Railroad. She made over 19 trips herself in order to ensure the ultimate safety of others. Even though she could not read or write, she was considered one of the leading conductors of the movement, and if all of THIS weren’t enough, she served as both a nurse and a spy for the Union Army. Talk about an adrenaline enthusiast! Legend has it that she was “strong, brave as a lion and as cunning as a fox.” When she passed away in 1913, she was buried with full military honors.

In her New York Times obituary of May 26, 1919, Madame CJ Walker was hailed as “The Wealthiest Negress.” Madame Walker married at 14 years old and was widowed at 20 years old with a young child to support. Although she worked as a cook, washerwoman or anything she could possibly do to be able to care for herself and her young child, she had the foresight to realize that what she was doing was not going to keep her going. Legend has it that one night she had a dream and something told her to start a hair tonic business….and so she did. On One dollar and 25 cents. Talk about ingenuity!! Within a few years and with much diligence and perseverance, she had amassed enough money to begin investing in real estate. Over the years her business and her real estate holdings grew and Madame Walker died a millionaire.

Women are smart, resourceful, resilient, tenacious. If we weren’t we wouldn’t be where we are-no matter where we are. Imagine the women who have shown us the way, like Phillis Wheatley and Sojourner Truth. And there are so many more.

In the 20th century, African American women made indelible contributions in all phases of life, politics, society and culture.

* Althea Gibson was born in Harlem and her family was on welfare. She was a troubled child but once she was exposed to table tennis and ultimately tennis, her skill and passion was undeniable. People recognized her talent and barriers began to come down. In 1950, she became the very first African American that was allowed to compete in the US Open in Forest Hills. In 1956 she won the French Open and the rest is even more history. She competed and won titles at both Wimbledon and Forest Hills and in 1958, she published her autobiography entitled, **I Always Wanted to Be Somebody.**  Clearly, she was, and remains an inspiration to all of us to this day.
* We may know her as the colorful legend that was the toast of Parisian nightlife, but Josephine Baker was not only an entertainer, she was a humanitarian and an activist. She began her career at age 13 in vaudeville reviews and on the Broadway stage. She eventually moved to Paris where she was instantly embraced and adored as an extension of the vibrant Harlem Renaissance and the Jazz Age. During World War II, Ms. Baker worked for the Red Cross and gathered Intelligence for the French Resistance. She and her husband adopted 12 children from all areas of the globe with the hopes of beginning a “World Village.” She returned to the US in the early 50’s and became an active and vocal advocate for racial equality.
* In 1969, Shirley Chisholm became the first African American female Congresswoman and went on to serve 7 terms. In 1972, she also became the first African American woman to throw her hat into the ring as a candidate for President of the United States.
* Condoleeza Rice grew up in the thick of segregation in Birmingham, Alabama. She was born in 1954 and was surrounded by racism and bigotry throughout her formative years, but somehow that must have inspired and fueled her to greatness. She is known to have said, “Differences can be a strength rather than a handicap.” She proved her words were not empty. Condoleeza Rice was the first African American to be a Provost at Stanford University, she was appointed National Security Adviser to President George W. Bush and went on to serve as the 66th Secretary of State of the United States.

In the 1960’s, as the women’s movement gained momentum, there was a popular commercial that acknowledged all of us. The attention getting slogan was, “You’ve come a long way, baby!!! And indeed, we have. The 21st century has brought us achievements and accomplishments by black women that would have made our foremothers more proud than anyone could possibly have imagined. Strides in all walks of life, politics, and culture continue to amaze and inspire us.

**CONQUERING TODAY’S OBSTACLES**

We have some fine examples of strong, vital, inspired, black women in our day and age as well. The 21st century brought us our own First Lady, Michele Obama, an accomplished, poised, intelligent inspiration if ever there was one. Mrs. Obama attended both Princeton and Harvard, she’s an accomplished attorney, she’s a wonderful mother and she’s an inspiration to our entire nation. She’s America’s “mom.” No matter who you are. With her intelligence, compassion, wit and savvy, she has brought her proud heritage with her and shares herself and her knowledge with all with whom she comes into contact. Whether she is sharing the benefits of having an organic garden or encouraging us all with her “Let’s Move” campaign, Mrs. Obama leads with an unassuming and egalitarian elegance that is infectious. She inspires all of us and is the perfect compendium of a person with a rich heritage, a knowing, inquisitive mind and endless compassion.

In October 2011, the Army named its first black female 2-star general. Marcia Anderson received that appointment after having served an honorable and achievement filled 30 years in the military.

We should all be very proud of the African American women whose invaluable contributions throughout history brought us to where we are today, but speaking of today, even with the accomplishments that make us so proud, obstacles continue to challenge us. Despite all the strides we have made economically, socially, physically and spiritually, there will always be conditions to threaten our well being and success:

• In an article entitled, “Challenges Facing Black Women Cited,” journalist David Crary gives us some things to think about:

• The need for the black woman’s voice to be heard and amplified is urgent.

• Nationwide, black women not only hold more jobs than black men, they are most likely the head of their household. In spite of their “breadwinner” status, black women earn about 12% less on average compared to black men.

In other articles, we learn that black women die from **preventable** diseases and conditions such as heart disease, obesity, hypertension, diabetes, HIV/Aids, domestic violence. Regarding education, although more and more black women are earning college degrees, far too many others don’t even have a high school diploma. History has shown us that there are opportunities, but we must be educated, healthy in mind and body, self-aware and self-assured in order to seize the moment.

**PREPARING THE WAY FOR FUTURE OPPORTUNITES**

I know someone whose theory is, if something’s not working-do the opposite. I’ve just cited the challenges facing black women today. Theoretically, it seems like a simple fix. But of course life is not so simple. But we have to remember anything that’s worthwhile is worth fighting for. Think of the women I mentioned earlier. Some, if not all, found the inner strength and sheer resilience to succeed. And that’s how the way is prepared for the girls who will follow in our footsteps. They will need to be educated on every level. They’ll need to know how to be healthy and take care of themselves. They’ll have to discover their sense of self-respect and confidence in who they are. They will need to learn the financial tools to appreciate money and use it wisely-no matter their economic level. They will need to be educated-both in “book smarts” and common sense. They will need to focus on who they are and not what they do or do not have. They will need mentors like you and me. And by the way, if any of you here today feel that you either want to mentor or feel the need of mentoring, let’s figure it out and see what each one of us can do to support the blossoming of a magnificent new generation of strong, self assured and successful black women!

Before I finish, I would like to give all of you a little gift. Allow me to share this poem by one of our true **SHE-RO’s**, Maya Angelou. Think of these words and no matter what you’ve been through, **learn** from them, be proud of who you are and from where you’ve come. Be proud of your heritage and celebrate life to the fullest, as it holds some amazing twists and turns and gifts. Here it is:

“Out of the huts of history's shame

I rise

Up from a past that's rooted in pain

I rise

I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,

Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear

I rise

Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear

I rise

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,

I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

I rise

I rise

I rise.”

There are so many other people that I could have cited and I guess it’s good news that there just isn’t time to mention Oprah or Pearl, Lena or Dorothy, Halle or Diana, Rosa or Marian. We have such a rich culture to inspire and teach us! Every day gives us the opportunity to celebrate all of them and ourselves as well. Civilization has a long way to go, but it’s like a great painting that is never finished. Nothing is perfect, but where there’s life there’s hope for acceptance, equality and respect.

Thank you all!