GALA SPEECH

FOR

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Hello everyone, and thank you for that kind introduction. It is a real honor to be here to acknowledge and celebrate those of our colleagues and countrymen among us who so valiantly serve in the armed forces. Your selfless contributions to our nation and ultimately its security cannot be underestimated. I would like to extend particular gratitude to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ for inviting me to speak with all of you tonight. Transition is a condition of change and acclimation we all experience and endure. We each have our own unique experiences. For those of us, and you, that have had the challenges of prolonged absence or involvement and more drastic instances of re-emergence, re-entry and adaptation, we take this time to recognize the trials our servicemen and servicewomen have faced and are enduring. Until we can walk a mile in someone else’s shoes, none of us has a true sense of the road a person travels, but with generosity of spirit, genuine interest in well being, and determination to bridge the chasm between experiences, we can begin to build the networks of communication and support needed to live adjusted and meaningful lives.

Life is kinetic. It is constantly changing and with each shift comes a period of adjustment. About changes, the late David Bowie said, “Turn and face the strange.” Life is wildly strange and alternately hellish, exhilarating, tedious, bizarre, vital, and just about any adjective one can think of. Our lives are made of separate moments and bridges that span the divides of adjustment. Each one of us has faced that “fork in the road.” (**If you want to make a joke you can say**) … and I don’t mean the cutlery that fell in front of your favorite restaurant (**And wait for the laugh**). It begins at an early age. We transition from being a toddler at home to going to school… we adjust and adapt to new school and social environments throughout our childhood to adolescence, teenage years and straight through to adulthood. As we get older certain timeless adages increasingly apply as we find the capacity to understand what it is that we go through. “Adapt or die” is a handy adage and one that I am glad we have all heeded (**If you think it’s appropriate to say the last part, do so and** **wait for the laugh**). Another echoes the sentiments of Helen Keller, a stellar example of a person for whom transition could have been insurmountable, but somehow she found her purpose throughout her life to overcome the challenges placed in her path. She said, “Life is either a daring adventure or it is nothing at all.” Here’s what I have to say about that. You’re here. Life is **NOT** “nothing at all.” Let’s find out how to navigate through it.

I began my life in Brooklyn New York and as a little boy my family relocated to Houston, Texas, and with that came the first transition and period of adjustment. As a young child I can’t say that I was phased by the move, but the ensuing years continued to present changes, challenges, and transitions as you can imagine, because as a human beings, we cannot stagnate. With the help of family and friends, teachers, and mentors, I learned to cross the chasms and connect the dots that, when viewed as one entity, created the pattern of my life.

It was during my college years, while I was attending Texas Southern University, that I seized the opportunity to be a game-day intern with the Houston Oilers and that is where I got my first taste of public relations. I had the privilege of being exposed and interfacing with sports journalists and other seasoned professionals. I saw early on the impact that could resound from effective communication and whether I fully realized it at the time, I was in the early stages of literally honing my “**game face**.” I realized that all relationships are predicated on practicing the skills and talents so necessary in successful public relations… skills borne out of consideration, communication, integrity, and respect.

As a college intern I was thrilled to have the experience. As a fledgling in the world of public relations, I had the gift of some incredible assignments. I moved on to become a public relations intern with the San Diego Chargers and in 1993, also as a public relations intern for the Dallas Cowboys, I had the privilege of being with the Cowboys when they won Super Bowl XXVIII…. That was some sweet transition! With every assignment I learned a new facet of the business and with every lesson I learned, I found the impetus to move forward. As a young professional in the field of sports PR, working in addition for the Houston Astros as well as on the media side for the Associated Press, The Houston Chronicle, and the Houston Post all provided me with lessons that built a foundation and a facility to adapt to change. With each new placement I learned the business from unique angles. I learned to interface with all levels of sport from athletes to management to press and like a good warm up in the gym or on the court, I learned to weave and bob, direct and deflect, adapt and defend. Transition is about learning how to cope and finding one’s own agility and elasticity in the process.

By 1994 I joined the Los Angeles Rams as the assistant director of public relations… and then a year later they relocated to St Louis. **THAT** was a challenge. Imagine what it’s been like for you as one person, or as a small family to relocate. Now imagine being tasked with the responsibility of maintaining an encouraging and optimistic image for an entire football team that moved halfway across the country… that was in a state of flux… and was experiencing a losing streak… and my team and I had to find positive angles throughout to encourage the franchise and its followers as it adjusted to life in St Louis. Someone once said, “Life is 10% what happens to you and 90% how you react to it. Maybe it’s because I am in the business of promoting public image, but those early experiences with relocation and negative press taught me that within every challenge something positive can and **MUST** be found and capitalized upon. No matter what we may face, it is up to each one of us to discover the bright spot and to look and see what support and infrastructure is available to sustain and promote our human survival. At that juncture with the Rams we must have done something right because our public relations team was recognized with the Pete Rozelle Award. (**You can explain more if you feel it is necessary… I think it might be beneficial to leave this simple to demonstrate risk/reward**).

Some people are of the school that in order to be successful one must “stay hungry.” By that I mean we cannot get complacent…comfort is not an environment known for producing results… keeping on the edge keeps one alert and in tune with the environment and future possibility. And as sure as day follows night… or does night follow day (**Wait for the laugh**) in 1998, opportunity and the chance for change and transition knocked again. I was named the public relations director of the Tennessee Oilers who would then become the Titans. Talk about a transition! There is an expression that teaches us, “I am part of all that I have met.” With each move and adjustment I found strength in the lessons I learned from the greats like (**Name some of your mentors and what they taught you about change and transition)** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ who taught me \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ from who I learned to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ whose contribution of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ has proved timeless and precious to me. As I learn, so I teach.

Over the years I have had the privilege of handling the public relations for the NFL for the 1999 Pro Bowl, and I was named the first ever Vice President of Communications for the newly formed Houston Texans, a position where I was honored to be included in the formation and promotion of a brand new team, building it from the ground up which was quite an experience. I had the honor of promoting a fledgling team and a great city and all of the challenges encouraged me to keep learning, growing, and perpetually searching for the inner strength and confidence… as well as outside support systems… to “work the magic” that was so clearly necessary.

For the past six years I have been Senior Vice President of the Washington Redskins. Each one of my professional experiences has informed the progression of change and adaptation needed for each new assignment.

The late author and entrepreneur Jim Rohn is credited with saying, “You must take personal responsibility. You cannot change the circumstances, the seasons, or the wind, but you can change yourself. That is something you have charge of.” Many of us are dealt a hand that may not be as equitable or as promising as others might receive, but success lies in the personal faith you discover within and demonstrate while strategizing how to handle those cards. For all of the service people here tonight, each one of us has a choice and that is to take what comes or to be an active participant in framing the life you intend to live.

This organization, the Petersburg Freedom Support Center, chooses to dedicate their collective resources to supporting the members of our Armed Forces. Through its own transitions and challenges, new opportunities are born and new connections are created. No matter who we are or what comprises our individual stories, we stand on the shoulders of our mentors, managers, families, and teachers. It is our duty to pay attention and in turn live a life worthwhile as we strengthen ourselves and give back to others…. our families… our comrades… our communities and our teams.

I have devoted my professional life to “spreading the word” and to promoting and fostering inspiration, teamwork, and respect. Life’s twists and turns have not provided a perpetually smooth ride, but it is in the grit and tests and the confrontations that I have learned to find my voice and in turn to share that voice with those that look to me for guidance.

Life is not easy but it can be incredibly rewarding and I will look back on this evening as one of the gifts I have received in this life. I am so thankful to have the opportunity to speak with all of you and to encourage the spirit of the soldier (**Would you rather say, “…encourage the spirit of resilience**?) in all of us.

(**Do you want to thank your wife and children? If so, you can do that here or at the beginning of the speech**) I also want to acknowledge three people who share their love and strength and humor with me every day. To my wife, Natasha, my son James Anthony, and my daughter, Toni Simone, you are the inspiration that drives me to conquer the transitions in life. Your love and support keeps me grounded, fuels my passion for my work, and keeps the wheels turning!! Thank you for being my muses and thank you all for your attention and dedication!