**15794, Jason McNary**

Good Evening Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honor to be invited here tonight to be awarded the BRAG Business Achievement Award. Your mission to prepare, educate and provide financial assistance to African-Americans, Latinos, Asians and other people of color for leadership in retail, fashion and related industries is honorable and appreciated. Education is integral to a person’s growth personally and professionally. It is this individual growth that will spur the continued growth of businesses among people of color.

My own journey to success in business was inspired by my grandfather, who was the first African American to open his own convenience store in Memphis. He has been my role model. Not only did he successfully operate his business, but he also worked tirelessly to help African Americans achieve equality in society as well as in business. He was very active with the late Martin Luther King and is remembered with great respect for those efforts.

Starting and growing any business is a challenge that not everyone can accomplish. It requires dedication and hard work. That may sound over simplistic but that is the core of any great accomplishment. You must be singularly committed to accomplishing your goal and willing to do whatever is required to accomplish it.

Throughout my career I have sought to model myself after my grandfather’s example. I have stretched the bounds of my own existence to reach the highest goals that were possible. I have challenged myself not only to do what was expected of me, but to reach beyond that. As I moved up the ladder of leadership, I have then reached back to those still on the climb before me to assist them in moving upward to reach their goals as well. I believe it is important that those of us who accomplish much have a responsibility to help others to reach their highest potential. For it is only with encouragement and assistance from those who have gone before us that we can take the journey even farther.

For any nation or people to achieve and maintain greatness, more is required than just hard work. Philanthropy is necessary so that those who are working will find the necessary resources to accomplish their goal. Those who have achieved much will have the resources available to help those who are still reaching and climbing. Another necessary part of achieving greatness is diversity. Everyone, regardless of age, gender, nationality or other differences have unique attributes to bring to the journey. Any wise business person will recognize that those differences are needed so that the business can achieve its highest level of accomplishment and continue to grow and achieve even greater heights as time moves on. It is not possible to simply reach a point of greatness and then sit on your laurels. Individuals and businesses must always be reaching for the next goal and accomplishment, otherwise they will simply stagnate.

I want to encourage the students in attendance to receive inspiration and be motivated, knowing that you can achieve anything regardless of color and regardless of where you began. You need only be willing to put in the hard work required for the long term, and be willing to work with a diverse group of others so that all your talents and skills can contribute to the work as a whole. Then, you can all glean from the benefits of all that hard work.

I want the executives present to be motivated by my story of hard work and defying the odds and obstacles to arrive where I am in my career. Any venture will have obstacles, regardless of who is attempting it or what they are attempting. The challenges are different for each individual or group, but anything worth achieving will have strong obstacles. I encourage all of you to first seek to challenge and stretch yourselves to the maximum. Then you will have a greater reservoir of knowledge and experience from which to challenge and encourage those you mentor and lead.

My background includes holding senior leadership roles at Calypso St. Barth, Hoss Intropia and currently Agnes B. From my earliest attempts at leadership and business achievement I have sought and I believe demonstrated strong vision and business savvy. This didn’t happen the first time I attempted an endeavor. These successes come from many years of challenging the status quo and stretching the existing boundaries. I learned these lessons one at a time and built upon my knowledge base from every lesson learned and accomplishment achieved.

When I take on college interns, CEO’s and executives I put all my life’s hard work and lessons learned into the mentoring experience. I encourage them to take advantage of the lessons I have already learned so that they can start from a better place and move forward, rather than starting from a point of no knowledge or experience. That’s what a mentor does, help the next person on the path to take advantage of their experience so that they can take the journey to the next level.

When I am mentoring students I encourage them to believe in themselves and what they can accomplish and build upon what they already possess. When I mentor executives I encourage them to not only believe in themselves, but to believe in the workers they hire and the leaders they develop to stretch and grow, and to continue growing throughout their lives so that learning never ceases. For to stop growing is to start dying.

It is imperative to firmly believe that anything is possible regardless of where you come from or where you want to go. But, belief in yourself, belief in the leaders and workers you choose is necessary. Trust your instincts and trust the guidance of your mentors. Regardless of your age, young or old, you should retain mentors who are farther along the path than yourself so that you always have an example before. But, also realize that as you view someone else as your guide and example, someone is viewing you as their guide and example. Diversity is key in any organization and we must learn to value each piece of that diversity as we learn and grow. I look forward to seeing the accomplishments that come out of the next generation of leaders over the next few years.

Thank you