**TRAILBLAZERS SPEECH**

**FOR**

**MARIAN COLEMAN**

Hello everyone! (**If you want to acknowledge any organizers or officers, you can do that here**). I would like to thank \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. It's wonderful to be here tonight to speak with all of you about a subject near and dear to my heart.... in fact, the concept of blazing trails has been at the core of my being and has functioned as my principle motivating factor for most of my life.... only back when I started on my journey, it didn't have a fancy or well respected title. It was more like, "Stuff **MUST** get **DONE**. I guess I'm **IT**." (**Say that with enthusiasm and wait for the laugh**). So now it has a fancy name and that's wonderful, but don't lose sight of the fact that even though we have advanced as a society.... even though we have the benefits of technological innovations.... even though, throughout the past few decades we have rewritten the social and ethical contracts for the better, for the most part, **WE STILL HAVE WORK TO DO**. I am astounded every day by the persistent need for us as a community... in both the narrower local sense and the broader global sense, to identify with and empower one another so that we all may live productive, enriched, fulfilled lives. In order to do that we need leaders. We need mentors. We need examples. We need **trailblazers**.

The dictionary definition of a trailblazer is, "a person who makes a new track through wild country." Synonyms are pioneer, groundbreaker, innovator. All of these words are powerful yet most of us, when we hear those words might look around with a "**Who...ME**?" expression on their faces. **YES. YOU**. The essence of the trailblazer exists within in each one of us. It tends to lie dormant, waiting for conscience, integrity, impatience, anger, or curiosity to call. But trailblazers are needed in this world. It's time to come out and leave your mark.

Misty Copeland, the first African American principal lead dancer in a major American ballet company has said, "Know that you can start late, look different, be uncertain, and still succeed." Committing to making a difference in this world.... even just a corner of it, does not rely on waiting forever or for the "perfect moment." There is work to be done. There is "stuff" to be cleaned up. There are battles to be fought, rights to be won... or at least retained, stands to be taken, and justice to be served. The time is **NOW**.

I grew up in a small, rural town in segregated South Carolina. I attended segregated schools. I grew up where the kids played on dirt roads. It wasn't easy. I learned at a very early age that life isn't fair. It's a struggle. But it's important to have faith and a sense of commitment. And it's urgent to not be afraid. The Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu is believed to have said, "Leadership has been defined as the ability to hide your panic from others." That's hard to learn but crucial to master. Remember the deodorant commercial from years ago.... "Never let 'em see you sweat?" (**Wait for the laugh**). Same thing. We **MUST** learn to trust ourselves. We **CAN'T** wait for someone else to **DO IT. STUFF** must get **DONE**. I remember when I was growing up in South Carolina just before those very early days of the Civil Rights movement. As I said, the streets were paved with.... well, they **WEREN'T** paved. They were dirt roads and when it rained, tremendous potholes formed and bloomed.... who knew how deep they were... they were filled with water. Anyway, in our neighborhood, the boys made a basketball court. It was basically an empty lot across the street from my aunt's porch. Next to the lot was a building and a makeshift hoop was set up. My aunt's porch was apparently the "bleachers..." the spot where all the girls would watch...Boy that porch got crowded when the boys would come to play! But the point I want to make is that no matter the conditions, no matter how bumpy or pitted or unsafe that ground may have seemed by today's standards, no one ever fell. No one ever twisted an ankle. No one ever had an accident. "How could that be?" you may ask.... I'll tell you why.... it's because those boys had determination and confidence. They wanted to "get it done." That intention exists within all of us. It's our human nature. The time has come to access it for the greater good.

Through the years, as I matured and found my way in this world, I encountered those proverbial potholes and puddles all along the way, but I knew failure was not an option. I knew there was work to be done, and I knew if not me, then **WHO** was going to do it? I knew we needed to "have a voice at the table." I knew we needed to be represented. And I knew we needed mentors to get us through, faith to guide us, education to understand the challenges we faced and are still facing, and perseverance to keep going back to our inner resources that fuel our passions and feed our purpose.

I completed my studies in the South. I fought for the cause (**How much detail do you want to go into? Let me know**). I was angry. I was impassioned. I knew conditions had to change. Opportunity knocked and I had the chance to go and teach..... in **IOWA CITY???? (Say this with animation and wait for the laugh**). Talk about change!! (**I need a little guidance regarding the chronology of your education and what brought you to Iowa. Please advise**). When I got here, to say that my family and I were outnumbered would be an **understatement**. Although I knew my husband and I had to leave the South, when we arrived in Iowa City in 19\_\_\_\_\_, there were still challenges and one by one I dealt with them. From housing discrimination to professional opposition and flat out roadblocks when it came to doing my job, everything was a battle, but I learned from the bigots. I did what I had to. I fought and won..... the irony was..... I was employed by the school system to work on **compliance! ...**And yet my colleagues still thought it was okay to disrespect me.

That's just a brief glimpse into what my life has been like up to my retirement. I suppose being the only female African American teacher, administrator, principal, compliance officer, district superintendent, carries with it a good deal of weight.... it also carried a lot of anger, frustration, and tenacity. What it **DIDN'T** foster was fear, inaction, or an extended sense of despair.... **THAT's** the takeaway I want you to remember.

In our heritage we have had the privilege of being guided by the vision and persistence of the trailblazers that have paved the way for us. Leaders like Harriet Tubman who literally blazed a trail from escaping from slavery to becoming a "conductor" for the Underground Railroad, she was responsible for securing the freedom of many slaves, including her parents, her siblings, and dozens of others. During the Civil War, she worked as both a cook and a nurse. Even when impossible conditions got worse, she persisted. She eventually settled on some property in Auburn, New York, but her life remained dedicated to securing the well being and dignity of others.

Rosa Parks became known as "The First Lady of the Civil Rights Movement." As an activist and secretary of the Montgomery, Alabama chapter of the NAACP, Ms. Parks was, as she phrased it, "tired of giving in" and when that unfortunate bus driver demanded that she give up her seat on that bus.... in the "colored" section... to a white woman, she had had enough and refused. The rest is history. Let's just say that Rosa made her point. She was fearless, determined, and persistent, even in the face of subsequent death threats. She was tired of giving in and she knew what she had to do.

...And then there was Josephine Baker. Although born in Missouri, Ms. Baker moved to Paris to be with her French husband, renounced her American citizenship, became the first African American woman to appear in a feature film, and was one of the most celebrated performers at the famous Folies Bergere. She was also an active member of the Civil Rights movement as well as the French resistance during World War II. She was famous, wildly popular, and she knew it. She used her power and her high profile to draw attention to the injustices of her times and this world is a better place thanks to the risks she took and the paths she engineered.

Tonight we honor some trailblazers (**add the information about the people being honored or give me the info and I will add**). \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

I've shared my story and given you an idea of the courage possessed by some of the more renowned trailblazers who have paved the way so that we can have the rights we share today. Every generation brings with it new challenges and hardships and so every generation must find the leaders to pave the way. Isabel Allende said, "We all have an unsuspected reserve of strength inside that emerges when life puts us to the test." In doing my research for this event, I learned of another person that deserves recognition for the tests she endured. Nadia Lopez is a principal at a school called Mott Hall Bridges Academy. It's in Brownsville, a rough neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. Her mission was to provide a solid education, a stable environment, and a sense of self respect for her students... something that is easier said than done. As you might imagine, the challenges of her job were almost insurmountable, and she was on the verge of giving up. At just about the same time, a young student of the school named Vidal Chastenet was approached by the photographer for the blog, Humans of New York. Vidal was asked a question.... "Who is the most influential person in your life?" Vidal replied that it was Mrs. Lopez. When asked to explain, he said, "When we get in trouble, she doesn't suspend us. She calls us to the office and explains to us that society was built down around us." Ms. Lopez is very involved with the kids as well as the parents also teaches the students to have self-respect. They are referred to as scholars and they are treated with dignity. As part of her program, she would take a deserving older student on a visit to Harvard so he or she might get a taste of possibility. The photo and caption of Vidal went viral. A Go Fund Me campaign was set up. 1.4 million dollars was raised in order to support having all of the students to be able to visit Harvard. Both Ms. Lopez and Vidal got to meet President Obama. Nadia Lopez says, "In this building (this school), my kids are going to feel like they're successful." It's a seemingly simple concept that can change the world. That's one example. How would you take that lesson to **your** community?

Living in today's world has its advantages and it also presents new challenges every single day. As soon as one fire is extinguished, two more erupt, and whether it's issues of civil rights, women's equality, immigration reform, marriage equality, gay rights, you name it... the time has come to search within ourselves and our conscience to find the means and the strength to combat and eliminate prejudice and bigotry. I know the bigots that crossed my path taught me an awful lot, and like Rosa Parks, we have all had enough. I want you to ask yourselves, "What will it take for me to combat the issues that stop me and my community?" What do you think you need in order to start blazing your trail? How much hate, discrimination, and intolerance do you think you .... and **WE**, were meant to endure? When is this society going to learn that we all have to work together to conquer ignorance, homelessness, drug and alcohol problems, illiteracy, lack of parental responsibility, erosion of infrastructure, employment, health care, educational challenges... and this is just the **BEGINNING** of the list of issues to be faced and resolved. The only way we will come together is if we find our starting points, mark our paths, and blaze our trails. If we think of each trail as a point of light, think of what might happen as all of those paths come together to illuminate a new, productive, respectful world.

Also, when I was thinking of what I wanted to say, I came across the work of a textile artist named 'Marion Coleman," only the first name was spelled with an O instead of an A. And though it may be difficult to believe, she had created a piece called, "Trailblazers." It is described as "A narrative quilt that is part of a series portraying African Americans in the West." Talk about a sign that we're on the right track! (**Wait for the laugh**). To me the quilt is more than that.... to me it's a metaphor of how, individually, each piece of fabric in the work is just an odd scrap, but when shaped and attached, those scraps become a powerful message of what can be achieved when the work comes together. It's a beautiful illustration of proof that the sum is greater than its parts, that everything matters, and that with effort comes more than possibility... it becomes reality.

Thank you all!

