**BANQUET SPEECH**

**FOR**

**DR. MICHAEL TAYLOR JR**

Hello everyone and thank you all for inviting me to this special occasion. I would like to thank \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ for asking me to share some thoughts tonight, and it is a privilege to be a part of such an important and critically needed conversation. Prairie Opportunity, Inc, is an organization whose vision and mission provide concrete options for those who need it most. You cast a ray of light in otherwise dark, usually frustrating and often seemingly hopeless situations. I am encouraged by the “**hand up**” and not just the hand out aspect of your vision and mission. The more we can come together and share this group’s message.... the more we will be able to examine the issues and figure out viable, evolving plans to educate, the more we find the means to provide substance and strategy, that light will shine brighter and lead to more clearly defined intention and positive results.... but as we have all learned the hard way in so many instances, we must work together as a community, sharing valuable ideas, points of view, and experience, in order for **ALL** of us to learn how to identify, expose, and combat the threats of poverty, misinformation, unnecessary red tape, and hopelessness. And by the way, I know that you know that **NO ONE** ever said this would be easy, but remember **ONE** thing.... if the tables were turned, **YOU** would want to have someone in **YOUR** corner.

Mississippi is a special place. It’s the birthplace of Oprah... Elvis was born here too.... Some claim root beer was invented in Biloxi... this state has a rich heritage, but it’s also known for one other reason.... by many measures, it’s considered one of the poorest states.... economically.... in this country... but the good news is that we’re known for something else as well....we look out for our neighbors... our friends.... and we find ways as a community to care for one another, and sometimes.... **MOST OF THE TIME.**... that’s a **REAL** challenge. Our sisters and brothers, friends and family, neighbors and co-workers... if we’re blessed enough to have a job and go to work... face problems and situations that can contribute to a sense of hopelessness, but through the commitment, vision, incentive, and outreach of groups like Prairie Opportunity, we have a chance to get to the roots of the issues and to extend a hand in educating and supporting positive impact. We must find the way to break the cycles of poverty and need that threaten to break our communities. Nelson Mandela said, “Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is the protection of a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life.” .... And make no mistake... each one of us.... no matter what we think we **DON’T** or **DO** have, is rich in **SOMETHING**.... and for the people that seem to have everything? It’s important that we not spend our energy wishing we had a different, “better” life.

A phrase keeps going around and around in my head.... “There but for the grace of God go I.” The phrase has been around for **HUNDREDS** of years so it must have meant something to at least a **FEW** people!! (**Wait for the laugh**). Think about it for a moment.... what does it mean to **YOU**? I think to me it says that no matter how bad a situation might be at the time, it’s important to hold on and to be thankful for what we **DO** have. As long as we’re alive, there’s hope and a way to find an option to solve whatever issues are at hand.... even if it seems really small at the time. We all have an assignment... keep asking questions.... keep persisting... keep placing one foot in front of the other in search of awareness, education and solutions. No one asks for a crisis. But it’s in tough times that strength and true character show through. This community is know for its tradition of leaning on one another, and that is a comforting thought. Let’s keep that tradition alive!

If you read even a few articles on why the economic condition of Mississippi is the way it is, we discover .... or confirm issues and problems that have existed for hundreds of years- issues that seem way too big for us to handle. From the ravages of the Civil War to the increasingly hot and muggy summers, we can go on and “bang our heads against the wall” in absolute and justified frustration. We can be bitter about the lack of infrastructure and we can get tangled in the rat wheel of despair.... or.... we can find a way.... or ways... to break the cycle, one step at a time. All it takes is one step to inspire a second or third gesture, which offers other people a chance to do the same.

The “experts” say that one reason that we’re stuck in this vicious cycle of need has to do with education... lack of quality education... lack of understanding how important it is to **HAVE** an education.... lack of the passion to learn. This has to stop. We have been shown how, when people.... no matter their age... no matter young or old, when people are treated with respect.... when they are allowed to find their own personal dignity... when they are guided by example and shown the way, true change happens.

In Brooklyn, New York, there’s a very tough, poverty stricken, marginally functioning neighborhood, having one of the highest crime rates in New York City. In that neighborhood is a school called Mott Hall Bridges Academy, and that school became famous. Why? Because one kid was asked a simple question. “Who has influenced you the most in your life?” The question was asked of Vidal Chastenet, at the time, a thirteen year old student at the school. His answer was “Mrs. Lopez.” She is the principal of the school and she has spent all of her energy and her intention on making sure the students in her school know their potential and have self respect and appreciation of their worth in the world. Historically, from that neighborhood, barely 32 percent graduate from high school. There is a tremendous achievement gap. The kids come from homes in which there is always a crisis, there’s trauma, distraction, abandonment issues, HIV, abuse, poverty, high pregnancy rates... you name it, it’s there.... but Ms. Lopez is relentless. She refers to the kids as “scholars.” She involves the parents and guardians in the education of their children and she makes sure everyone understands the expectations required to attend and the consequences that result if expectations are not met. There are codes of conduct to be followed... or else... but Mrs.Lopez is committed to the success of her scholars. Her determination does take its toll however, and just before Vidal was asked that question, she was ready to quit. But it just so happens that an influential young man with a very large online following asked the question and within days it became clear that Mrs. Lopez’s absolute devotion was making a difference. Vidal’s interview went viral. Her message was heard. She got through to him. Vidal **GOT IT**. And now the world can be inspired..... **WE** can learn from this and in turn we can take steps to learn what worked and implement change. In his response, Vidal said, “When we get into trouble, she doesn’t suspend us. She calls us into her office and explains to us how society was **built down** around us. And she tells us that each time somebody fails out of school, a new jail cell gets built. One time she made every student stand up, one at a time, and she told each one of us that we matter.”

Each member of our community matters as well... whether it’s a single mother struggling to feed herself and her kids or your young next door neighbor that just lost a job, every single one of us faces potential issues. There is not one person sitting here tonight, enjoying this great atmosphere and this abundant meal, who has a lifetime guarantee... and that’s why programs like Prairie Opportunity are so critically important, and it’s also why it’s so necessary for all of us to do whatever we can to provide our own unique talents and contributions to the combined effort of lifting **OUR** Mississippi up from the challenges and crises we have had to consistently endure. Failure can no longer be an option. This organization must succeed in accomplishing its mission.

Sustainability is the vision of Prairie Opportunity.... to insure that all people and families are able to take care of themselves.... to the point of inspiring self-sufficiency, self respect, and in turn, service to others. Society has been “built down” around our relatives and neighbors for generations. Clearly, something is not working and so I really believe it’s time to come together to place our energy in finding the most effective route to our own mutual survival.

I am fairly certain that one thing we’ve all realized is that for the past several years, there’s a LOT more information to handle and it’s coming at us more and more quickly. I’m encouraged to see that in Prairie Opportunity’s strategic plan, education is of “global” importance, meaning that it’s just as important to keep community leaders informed as it is to educate all of the residents of the community.

Knowing that your scope of outreach encompasses a wide range of potential clients is also gratifying for me. I know that through my church, we have a benevolent office and we do whatever we can for the advancement of care and understanding within our congregant community, but I have to say that I applaud you, Prairie Opportunity, for the thoughtfulness and inclusionary aspect you demonstrate, in both the sectors you support and the make up of the panels that assess the granting of benefits. People falling within the spectrum of the disabled, the elderly, and the low income sectors tend to be “members” of a club no one wants to be a member of..... the marginalized. Through your caring and careful review process, people that fall into these categories no longer have to feel as though they’ve been forgotten or pushed aside.

The dedication of Prairie Opportunity is an inspiration to all of us. It’s a thoughtfully

planned out program that really does what it can to make sure no person is left behind and no stone is left unturned in the efforts to identify and implement successful strategies for each client that will potentially benefit from the services offered. I think it’s a particularly good idea to have a diverse panel reviewing cases and making decisions. Knowing that the committee is made up of members of the low income community as well as the public and private sectors is a reassuring sign that everyone will be heard and evaluated equally and thoroughly. And knowing that the benefits will be focused on the elderly, disabled individuals and their families, and those with low income, is impressive.

Let’s think of tonight as the beginning of a new era in the well being of our community. Let us all come together in support of one another.... not just the individuals who express obvious need, but for the staff and volunteers of Prairie Opportunity.... for the volunteers that support the vision.... for the merchants and local business owners that provide the infrastructure and logistics that bring the vision to life. Let’s support the elderly and remind them that their contributions helped to establish our legacy.... for our disabled neighbors, let’s get them the assistance they need in order to be able to have them encourage all of us in the jobs we do. Let us reach out to those in need of financial reassurance. Let’s remind them that they are not alone, and it is in the challenging times when we can see the strength of will and determination that is demonstrated. Every person in this area has the ability to provide encouragement, moral support, and a helping hand. No one should be made to feel that they are a burden, an afterthought, or a drain on society. In this community, **EVERYONE** is a vital member... it is up to us.... to encourage that bond and to show the way. Having a vision of a sustainable Mississippi is a very **BIG** vision, but it can be done.... step by step... with sound, concrete strategies.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr said, “Life’s most most persistent and urgent question is, ‘What are you doing for others?” We in this room know what the answer is for the staff members and volunteers of Prairie Opportunity. I encourage the rest of us.... the entire community..... to do what is needed to continue to bring and expandthis vision and mission.

I want to congratulate everyone involved with this great organization and I look forward to supporting the mission of a sustainable, self-reliant, thriving Mississippi for all of us. Thank you very much!