**AWARDS SPEECH**

**FOR**

**DETRICK STANFORD**

Hello everyone.... I want to say how great it is to be back in what I believe, is, and always will be, my “hometown....” many of my family members still live here and I consider it to be a “very good idea” when I get to come home to visit and be in such special circumstances as this... (**If you want to make a joke you can say**) ... it almost makes me wonder... Did my mother put all of you up to asking me to speak tonight??? (**And wait for the laugh**).... It wouldn’t surprise me.... any excuse or reason to come back and visit... I’m proud of my family, how I was raised, the values that were instilled in me over the years, and having roots right here in Waycross... where I learned... at an early age... the power and meaning of having a solid foundation... of being taught right from wrong. It was here in Waycross that I learned the power of giving and the grace and responsibility in receiving. It is thanks to my family... and my parents, that I am who I am today. Believe me, I am as proud of my mother, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ ... and my late father, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, as they were and are, of me. **Whether or NOT** my mother actually **DID** have something to do with me being here? Well, in our hearts I **KNOW** I am always drawn back... in any event, we’re all here to share a great evening...

I want to thank \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ for extending this gracious invitation. It is always a pleasure and a privilege to be amongst people that realize the good... the positive elements there are in the world...and make it their mission to do something that makes a difference... by celebrating humanity... especially when it comes to advocating for, and acknowledging the commitment and potential of young people. And though we live in challenging and divisive times, I am encouraged to learn about, and say a few words of support and empowerment to all of you and especially to those fine young people we are here to honor tonight. I also want to recognize the work, message, and sense of community that Alpha Kappa Alpha, and in particular this wonderful chapter, Chi Gamma Omega, consistently convey. It really does take a village to raise our children and build our futures and we are all blessed to have such supportive, enthusiastic, and **involved** participants as all of you. You lead with your smiles... you encourage with your enthusiasm... your optimism is as bright as the pink and green of your signature colors. You mentor and show the way with your dedication to excellence and respect for your legacy, one that has endured for **over one hundred years**... I have to say, you all wear it well!! (**Wait for the laugh**). The principles and standards that guide you are timeless and are all great examples for our young people to emulate. Thank you.

The late First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, said something wise and worth paraphrasing... “A woman is like a tea bag. You never know how strong she is until she’s in hot water...” (**Wait for the laugh**). Growing up here in Waycross, it was usually us kids that

wound up in hot water.... but thankfully, we had many people in our community watching out for us...really caring about us, and really feeling vested in our upbringing, discipline, and orientation towards life.....it really did take a village to keep us out of hot water and show us the way... we may not have realized it at the time.... or we realized it but hesitated to acknowledge it, but **BOY** were we lucky!!! That one, now famous, expression, “It takes a village” rang supreme as my siblings, friends, and neighbors will attest to, as we were growing up. Many of the neighborhood families invested time and energy to insure that our community was solid... that we had role models to emulate... we were surrounded by neighbors that made sure we knew, without a shred of doubt what was right... and what **WASN’T**... I grew up in a time... and place... right here in Waycross, in which people knew the importance of nourishing us... mind, body, and soul. The community would work as one and make sure all the kids were fed....they got together and provided money and gifts to acknowledge important life events like birthdays, graduations, and the like. The elders in our community also made sure to provide both interim and infinite wisdom... and I have to say that being a part of a celebration like this, one that really does naturally and organically follow the traditions of my youth, whether intended or not, really warms my heart and brings back memories....

(**Say a sentence or two about two or three people that influenced you as a child growing up in Waycross**) I remember so many of the events and instances of kindness and generosity. Those times encouraged me to become who I am today... to choose my path... and in turn, contribute to my community... and to pave a path for others to follow... because that is what was done for me. There were people like \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ who always managed to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, and my teacher, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, who somehow managed to find the time, even with her busy schedule, to make sure \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, and of course there was my own (**Name a relative**) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, who watched **VERY** closely... and made sure that I was behaving!!!! She always used to say,” \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.” Believe me, I speak to you, here and now, as an adult with a few years of experience behind me and a more complete outlook on life, I **GET IT** !!! (**Wait for the laugh**).

I am heartened and encouraged as I learn the stories and celebrate the winners of tonight’s awards. It’s wonderful to have the chance to acknowledge and affirm that we, as a culture and community, are inspiring, supporting, and challenging tomorrow’s “game changers” as they “strive for excellence” and find their own place “at the table of the future.” It is only through understanding that we will build and strengthen the foundation for our youth. It is through positive reinforcement...not only “talking the talk,” but “walking the walk,” that we, as aware, committed, and conscious adults, will do our part in our “village” to foster the successes and fulfillment of our young people.... of course, in modern times, that village is becoming more and more “virtual,” but **HEY**!!! We adapt with the times!! (**Wait for the laugh**). There will always be a welcome place in this world for those who are committed to others... who honor and respect service, common sense, and integrity.

What are some of the characteristics we look for in a selfless, respected servant leader?? What are the characteristics required to understand and to have the vision and capability to discover what is needed and wanted in this world and to take the initiative to act accordingly and to serve? I believe it starts with being selfless, having a good work ethic, and finding the passion within to be an innovator of change. How do we do this while still valuing the legacy into which we’ve been born? How do we honor and learn from the past while we work to identify and implement what is needed in the future??

Tonight we are gathered to learn the names that will define the meaning of excellence: Dallas Benefield, Novasha Bennett, Zy’Keriya Holmes, Kyrah Humphrey, Younique Johnson, Jania Reese, Jelanie Reese, and Isabella Velez-Hill... we are just learning of your special gifts and commitment to building a stronger, more engaged, inclusive world. Your optimism, idealism, and willingness to “be the change” is inspiring and encouraging to all of us. Tonight we are gathered to celebrate your accomplishment ..... the current enthusiasm is technically confined to this room.... but as you refine your skills and strengthen your unique message, the trajectory of your positive impact will grow way beyond the confines of Waycross... and believe me, this world really needs that!!! Of course, along the way, the “village” that has raised you and taught you and kept you on course to get to this milestone, will continue to grow. As you distinguish yourselves in life, and as your accomplishments attract and inspire others, your capacity to receive even greater, more impactful advice and guidance will increase as well.... and tonight, it’s my privilege to share highlights of the lessons I’ve learned that have made a difference with me. Tonight I get to revisit the wisdom shared by my elders. It’s what we do... we get the word, we synthesize it and understand what we can. We place one foot in front of the other and we train our sights on finding what’s needed to make this world a better place and we pitch in, with consideration and mindfulness for all.

Langston Hughes said, “Reach high, for the stars lie hidden in your soul. Dream deep, for every dream precedes a goal.” Tonight’s award winners did just that. They were, and are, motivated by dreams of change, but it is their **actions** that distinguish these fine young people. A while ago, I came across a quote from a man named Benjamin Mays. “It must be borne in mind that the tragedy of life does not lie in not reaching your goal. The tragedy lies in having no goal to reach.” Apathy and action are two sides to the same coin. The young leaders we toast tonight are made of the same fiber and foundation as every other kid in our community... but they got the memo. How do we continue to inspire these winners while working to ignite the flames in the entire youth population? We start by encouraging the encouraged. We reflect on the sparks that lit our own fires. Most of all, we **DON’T. GIVE. UP**.

Life gets harder as we get older and the climb gets steeper. Just ask anyone that has been to the new Hudson Yards development in New York... there’s a sculpture... more like a structure, called the Vessel... if you want to get confused and even a little winded... take a look at this thing... it’s described as a “honeycomb-like structure” that is sixteen stories tall with **ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY FOUR** flights of stairs and **TWENTY FIVE HUNDRED STEPS**!!! To me, it’s also a metaphor of life. We have to keep climbing. Sometimes it may feel like we go around in circles and wind up in the same place. We invest effort and energy... for **WHAT**? We may temporarily lose our way... we may feel stuck in a maze of uncertainty... we may think we’ve searched, strived and done the hard work yet feel like we failed.... but through all of that, we have to remember the important thing is that we **DID**. Always remember that each step is on purpose to the goal... even when it seems like we fall short of our plan. As long as we keep learning from the past, adding to our tool kit of knowledge and experience, and being willing and open to being an agent of change and doing the hard work... as all of you have been doing... we’re going to see some interesting progress from all of you.

Leaders are made from strong motivation and commitment to community... in the broad and narrow senses of the term, and the willingness to get done whatever is needed to lead by example. The author, Anaïs Nin, teaches us, “Life shrinks or expands in proportion with one’s courage.” Alice Walker said, “The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don’t have any.” The **REALLY** good news is that all of you winners **ARE** winners... and are young enough, open enough, and enthusiastic enough, to listen, learn, and condition yourselves to focus on your strength and strengthen your weaker points... if there **ARE** any!! I mean... I’m **REALLY** impressed with all of you!! (**Wait for the laugh**). The time has come... for... ready??? My **OWN** words of wisdom for all of you.

When I think of what drives and inspires me to be a servant leader, three points stand out:

* Being selfless
* Having an exemplary work ethic
* Being an innovator of change.

If we were paying attention to those that have guided and inspired us to get where we are, wherever that might be, the one common thread we would identify is selflessness. To serve is to have empathy and to demonstrate it. To care for others is to care for all of us. It’s critical to adapt to a mindset of inclusion. I think we can all see how that is needed in every area of life, especially in these times. No matter what material or “virtual” gifts each one of us does or does not possess, if we really think about it, we have **enough**. We have more than enough spirit and soul and compassion to share, and as we share, our portion grows. Give it away... it will come back to you in grace, fulfillment, and acknowledgement.

Have an exemplary work ethic. This starts young. Be present. Be conscious. Be responsible. You may be young but now is the time to choose to form **GOOD** habits. Give more than you get. Keep your eyes and ears open to learn.... Emulate the actions, ethics, and integrity of those mentors you admire. Take mental notes. Give more than you receive. Go those extra steps to do a complete job in a timely manner and double check your work. Find your way to have a sense of ownership for every task and assignment you are given. It is when you understand what ownership and accountability really mean that you will be well on your way to demonstrating an admirable and exemplary work ethic..... and then you will inspire others to do the same. Don’t ask anything of anyone that you are not willing and capable of doing yourself. Be ready to **DO THE WORK**.

And through it all... with all of the steps... with all of the service... with all of the persistence, determination, humility, and integrity, on top of **THAT**... keep creating!!! Keep finding ways to make a **POSITIVE** impact on this world... keep your mind consistently searching for the **NEXT** thing that is needed and wanted... that fills a void and serves your community. We live in a world that is **KINETIC**... lots of moving parts.... nothing **EVER** stands still. We all must constantly shift and adapt to meet the needs of the times.... but **AHA**!!!! Here’s the trick.... we have to juggle **ALL** of these “leadership plates” while building our foundations, sharpening our skills, learning to pay attention to everything around us, and honoring our families, our legacy, and those that walked the walk before us.

I know I’ve given all of you a lot to “digest.” Remember when you thought you were just showing up to get an award and have a great meal??? **HA**!! (**Wait for the laugh**). If you **STILL** have an appetite for life and service after all of this... and I **KNOW** you do, I want to acknowledge and congratulate you. You have what it takes to be great in this world. You have the components of being... and continuing to be... an engaged, effective, inspiring servant leader. If the accomplishments for which you are being honored tonight were achieved at your young ages, just **IMAGINE** what you’ll get done in the future!!! I am impressed, encouraged, and inspired by your individual and collective determination and I look forward to hearing great things about each one of you very soon.

To all of the members of Alpha Kappa Alpha, Chi Gamma Omega Chapter, thank you for all of the incredible work you do to sponsor, acknowledge, and support legacy, tradition, and encouragement in building tomorrow’s leaders. It’s good to be home!! Thank you all!!!