**CONFERENCE SPEECH**

**FOR**

**GLEN WORTHY**

**REVISED**

Hello everyone!!! I want to thank you for inviting me to be here today, to attend this spring conference, and for giving me the opportunity to hopefully be seen, heard, and recognized…. Sounds like a plan…. and a theme for my intentions for the next several minutes!!! On that note, I want to recognize the administrators, academic and vocational teachers, the secretaries, and all of great ancillary members and distinguished guests. I would like to extend special thanks to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ for inviting me to be here today, to have the opportunity to talk about the common thread that ties us all together. Let’s face it, we’re all here, doing what we do, united in the related mission of making the world, or at least our communities, a safer, more secure, and more functional place in which to live. It’s imperative that we support ways in which we can build and sustain communities where our youth have positive examples and qualified mentors to usher the way to meaningful adulthood. Each of us may approach the mandate from unique angles, but the common goal is there. As such, I applaud you!!

We are all here, aligned in one goal, and that is to celebrate your hard work as we acknowledge the theme of this Spring Conference… that all of you are “Dedicated to Team USD #1!!!” What does it mean to be “seen, heard, and recognized?” Whether or not we realize it and/or have issues accepting it, that’s the “secret sauce” we all crave. Its why we’re here today, celebrating **YOU**!! It’s just natural, as human beings, to want to be assured that our presence is valued…. that we matter….that we make a difference. When that’s missing, I think we can all agree that sinister seeds can be sown, “stuff” happens, and human damage occurs. The British politician, David Lammy has said, “A good society is characterized not just by liberty but by mutual respect and responsibility. When this breaks down, it takes a lot more than police officers to put things right.”

Now, of course, it might seem that I’m being a little cryptic, but I will explain in a bit….. First, I’d like to fill you in with a little bit about myself. My last name may be “Worthy” but the truth is that although I told myself, and others, that simple factoid every day of my life, I didn’t always know and believe it …. inherently. Marginalized??? Look it up in the dictionary. My picture would have been there… over in the corner, not knowing what the next day would bring my family …. or me. I grew up in a home that **wanted and needed**…. just about everything and had…. **just about nothing**. What we **DID** have, in abundance, were challenges… very low household income, a proliferation of really serious family dysfunction, a consistent condition of food and nutritional insecurity… you name it… we had it. I grew up being peripherally and more directly involved in the justice system. It’s no accident that I chose the career path I now follow. Somehow, innately, through the hardships, there was something… something to hold on to. I recently heard a quote that made me pause and really think… it was a song lyric…. “There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.” We find ourselves so caught up in the minutiae of just surviving daily trials and tribulations that we lose sight of the big picture. We can easily lose focus on the real issues because we’re so intensely involved in putting out the most immediate fires. I encourage you to think about those cracks that allow the light to get in and I will mention it again, because that’s where possibility is found.

Possibilities…. I don’t know where or how I developed my perseverance, but thank goodness I found the strength to explore beyond what was generally accepted as my limitations. Even with all of the roadblocks conspiring to trip me up, I searched for the cracks and found the light…. even if it was just a little…. and I kept going. At the age of fifteen, I joined the work force…. I started with odd jobs and worked my way up to the **ultimate** odd job…. The one I currently hold … (**Wait for the laugh**). In between, I worked in food service, retail/clothing, construction, painting….. I was a substitute teacher, RTF, and school counselor. I coached high school football and I was a principal for an adult education program. I worked my way up from assistant principal to principal, and here I am, with you, today. I suppose one might say I’m a “people person.” No matter what the situation, I find the “human comedy” fascinating… okay… maybe not so funny… I’m using the term “comedy” in the classic sense…meaning the vast variety of a life lived… and yeah, more often than not, not so funny… many times it’s impossibly hard work… as you know…. But when it clicks…. When we can really experience the shift in a person’s fundamental reason to be, what we do can be exhilarating…. The rarity of triumph keeps us hooked. We must interact with every person as though they will get through the mess and the system to prevail as functioning human beings.

Looking back, I suppose I wondered if my last name was a weird joke or an ironic guide… maybe it was the crack that let in the light for me…. I clearly chose to believe it was more of a guide. I had a profound realization that there was more to life than the seemingly insurmountable conditions placed before me and I was willing to work for it. I was determined to go through the really hard stuff in order to come out the other end with greater experience and deeper insights into who I am, the strengths I possess, and most of all, what my mission would look like…. and how I would share that experience to support others in finding their own **Worthiness**. I really believe that there is a way…. a route… to discovering the light, even in the darkest of circumstances. All of you here today have exhibited tremendous determination… to choose the tasks and jobs for which you’ve signed up…. That takes **GUTS**!!! . Getting through a day often probably feels like an eternity…. The “**hits**” keep coming… literally and figuratively….please excuse the little bit of dark humor…**very little,** apparently… (**Wait for the laugh)**. Through it all, you stand strong… you have no choice but to set an example, “keep it moving,” and inspire reform and rehabilitation…. I bet there are many times… even in the course of a single day, when you ask yourselves, **WHAT THE HECK AM I DOING HERE**??? … but you know. You **KNOW** you make a difference. You **KNOW** what it means to be “seen, heard, and recognized.” You **KNOW** the value of human connection and encouragement. You **KNOW** that, more often than not, respect and encouragement are the last boxes you want to tick on your “Bingo card,” yet you persist. I applaud you.

“Men fear death.” This was a line from a movie I mostly forgot that came out ages ago. It was said in response to a character questioning the validity of love. Men fear death. People fear death, yet here we are, working in a sector in which our “clients” act out…. Let’s face it, we know there are roots and reasons why the kids we serve wind up here. We **KNOW** sometimes it seems like it’s only lip service to say we understand the problems these kids face and the insurmountable odds that accompany fixing those issues. We **KNOW** we have to find the cause and treat the disease and not just the symptoms, but sometimes it’s just so damned hard…. but we must continue to look for the cracks so the light can get in.

Fear…. That reminds me of a classic story… one that most of us grew up with… thinking it was just a tale for kids that became one of the first movies to be in color…. One that we believed … and probably still do believe is for children…. **SURPRISE**!!! The Wizard of Oz is all about fear…. Fear of the unknown… fear of finding … or **NOT** **FINDING** a path in life…. Fear of the “bad witches” that conspire to knock you down…. Fear of losing one’s self and identity…. And the fear that emanates from the town bully. The Wizard had lots of bluster but hid behind a curtain. So many of the kids we serve hide behind the bluster of their own curtains. It’s up to us to grab that curtain, whatever it may be, and expose the façades that conspire to encourage acting out. While we all want to find our own “Emerald City,” sometimes it’s a mirage… not real… not attainable. It’s more important to find worthiness from within. … not an easy task. We have to work together to bust the power of fear…. For us and for those we serve.

There is documentation that facing fear and breaking down the elements that invoke negative behaviors can be successful. In an article found in the digital magazine, District Administration, there is a piece entitled, “At-Risk School Success stories.” The article goes on to document how various schools and programs throughout the country have faced the fears and problems presented to their students and how those procedures impacted outcomes. The article begins with the proposition:

“*If you came to work and hadn’t eaten for a day or two, you wouldn’t be prepared to work” says Jennings School District Superintendent Tiffany Anderson, who has received national attention for progress that her St. Louis-area system has made since she took over in 2012. “So why would we expect adolescents to come prepared to function mentally and physically without their basic needs being cared for?”*

Address the disease…. Don’t place a bandaid on the fallout.

The article goes on to point out:

*“To boost academic outcomes for “at-risk” students—and turn entire underperforming districts around—school leaders now operate social services like food pantries and homeless shelters. In the classroom, teachers lead mental and physical exercises to help students focus on instruction designed to be more relevant to future career aspirations.”*

The actions inspired positive change. Further on, we learn that:

*“The rate at which Jennings students meet academic standards has soared from 57 percent in 2012 (when the district’s accreditation was at risk) to 81 percent in 2015. The district, in which all of its students are served free or reduced-price lunch, opened a student homeless shelter near one of its elementary schools in a home refurbished by community members. It also operates a hospital at one of its high schools and donates 8,000 pounds of food a month to its families. Each school also has washers and dryers that parents can use for free, in exchange for one hour of volunteer work, such as monitoring the cafeteria.”*

In order to inspire greater, more positive results through the work we do and for the people we serve, no matter how challenging it might seem, I believe it is essential to focus on the good….the supportive… the constructive… facets whenever possible, and let’s face it, opportunity does **NOT** always knock…. In fact most days, it doesn’t even feel like it can find the neighborhood we’re in….. (**Wait for the laugh**)… but it’s on us to look for the cracks that let in the light.

In a commencement speech given several years ago, at Spellman College, Oprah Winfrey gave some very sage advice. She said, “People don’t always like you. And they’re not always happy for you. And if you surround yourself with people who are not accustomed to your success, they become fearful. They become scared because you are reflecting back something to them that they don’t recognize. People who want the best for you want you to be your best.” Unfortunately, young people at risk don’t get this message at the time and in the circumstances in which it would really make a tremendous difference in a young, impressionable life. Many adults don’t even get it. It’s infuriating and frustrating to think that the people closest to you may not be rooting for you… may not want to see you “get better”…. to heal…. to find success and satisfaction in life… to overcome environmental obstacles …. especially if those people around you are in crisis and don’t have the strength or the tools or the wherewithal to pull themselves up and find their own self respect. I think that’s a large place in which the trouble lies. Once again, everyone wants to be **seen, heard, recognized**…. And many of our youth are left behind, unable to function in society, literally ready to “burn it down” and take others with them.

An opinion piece was featured in the Washington Post, written by a young man named Eddie Ellis. The title of the article is very telling. “I am one of the success stories from DC’s second chance law for young offenders.” The article tells us that Ellis, at the age of 16, was arrested for first degree murder. The sentencing report suggested that he be punished to the fullest extent of the law. It was believed that he was a lost case… that he could not change… that he should be locked up for life. When actual sentencing came down, he got twenty-two years…. Although the sentence was actually longer than he had been alive at the time, somehow, he found the crack and the light…. He saw it as a second chance for his life. He recognized the **possibility**. In the beginning of his incarceration, he was angry, frustrated, and acted out. He felt the prison system was failing him. He craved a way to have meaningful rehabilitation in a system that was not working. I don’t have to emphasize this…. We’ve all be at the effect of ineffective systems. Eddie’s story teaches us that there is hope…. there is a way….there is a reason we do what we do. Since his release, he founded an organization called “One by1, a non-profit dedicated to youth mentorship and successful re-entry into communities for the formerly incarcerated.” While he states that he never forgets what he did and is always aware of the impact his actions had and have on the lives of his victims’ loved ones, he has devoted his own life to healing and educating others.

It seems like he is the exception, but he doesn’t have to be. No matter how tough it may seem, it is on us to look at the kids in our systems and be their light. That crack… that beam of hope travels a two way street. As well as we may be mired in despair and a little glint of light might show the way, that light also works inward…. We must consider looking inside the way these kids, our “clients” are formed, what their negative experience or foundations yielded, and somehow get the message through that, as corny as it may seem, there **IS** hope.

There is another example of positive impact I would like to share…. And I have mentioned this before. I like to go back to this story because it is so inspiring, relatable, and useful… it’s about an artist, a plan, and a maximum security prison. The Tehachapi California Correctional institution is a Supermax prison in Southern California. Seems like a **tough gig,** no??? (**Wait for the laugh**). Guess what??? It is. But in 2019, a French artist named JR saw a situation, found a crack, and devised a way to “bring in the light.”

JR, who began his career as a graffiti artist, switched to photography when he found a camera on a train … by all accounts, he **SWEARS** he didn’t steal it… (**Wait for the laugh**). His body of work began with taking portraits of local kids in the slums outside of Paris and developed into site specific large scale photo paste ups with the intention of bringing various forms of human struggle to light and to attention. The Tehachapi project seemed like a good idea. Bring the prisoners, many of whom were gang members that were incarcerated as youths … with little to no hope of parole…. prison guards…. and even family members of the victims…. bring them all together for one very impactful, larger than life, group shot, and put all of the subjects to work pasting the final product onto the grounds of the prison yard. Ok… here is where I ask for a show of hands…. Who’s in???? If we can get JR here… who wants to be in the picture??? …**KIDDING**!!! (**Wait for the laugh**)…but really… It **WORKED**. Remember: **Seen. Heard. Recognized.** In an article on NPR.com, JR explained the genesis of the project:

*“I sent two friends to scout one prison I had just scouted on Google Earth. And when they came back from it, they called me, and they said, JR, it's incredible. And I said, OK, come with me. We're going to paste the entire prison.*

*They're like, look, JR, that's a supermax security prison. It's called Tehachapi. It's actually in the top five of the most violent prisons. I was like, that will do it. The next day, we flew there. We arrived there, and, of course, you know, it's not that easy. You get there, it's - like, fences, electric fences, walls, and you add more walls and more people that check your IDs. And I got to get all the way to the yard. And it looked like some army guy with, like, bulletproof jackets and heavily armed who say, all right, there's some people waiting for you in the gymnasium. We gathered some inmates. You cannot approach them. You cannot touch them. You can sit at the chair that we designed for you, and we're going to surround the area of the gymnasium.*

*When I went there, they had actually gathered a group of maybe, you know, something like 40 inmates. And I sat at the table with all of them, and a lot of them were there since they were kids between 13 and 20. Some of them had life without parole. A lot of them had life. Really, even the warden told me - he said, look, those guys - we don't even screen movies for them. We don't even do any art program. You know, they couldn't even imagine that a project like that could happen.”*

**REMEMBER… Seen. Heard. Recognized.**

JR continues to explain…

*“I think the goal was to create a project with the people there. And let me tell you. There are some people that really need to be there, you know, and really deserve to be there and really don't have that same energy of that group that I had. So what happened actually is I explained to them what I do. I said, well, you know, in the process of what we're about to do, if you want to do it, you'll record your story, and you'll tell your story by yourself. But I just want you to know before you do that that I won't be asking questions. You know, this is how you want to actually share your story. And a lot of them, when they did the audio,* ***they spent like 30, 40 minutes in, you know, the room recording their story by themselves, sometimes crying because they'd never had, in all those years, a moment where they could actually share and explain with their own words.”***

**SEEN. HEARD. RECOGNIZED**

Some of the comments recorded by the prisoners were real eye openers… they hit the gut and touch the soul. Probably, for the first time, because of the project, the light was able to seep through.

* *Prisoner One: I'm currently serving a 15-years-to-life sentence. I've been incarcerated since I was 22 years old. I'm 30 years old now. My birthday's on Wednesday.*
* *Prisoner Two: Grew up, you know, in messed-up environment - always being evicted. I never really had a dream growing up.*
* *Prisoner Three: It's wild here. There's - when we do come out for yard, there's stuff happening all the time. People fight. People get stabbed. They get shot with the block guns. They throw smoke grenades.*
* *Prisoner Four: You've - pretty much lose touch with reality. And I spent many years back there never thinking I would have an opportunity like this to present myself in a humane manner.”*

Although the project was completed four years go, it’s impact was and is, profound. Prisoners who once held no hope have been reformed. The original twenty-eight subjects who participated in the piece have inspired others in their situation. At a screening of the documentary featuring JR’s work, Angelina Jolie introduced the film by saying, “I was reminded watching the film that the most revolutionary thing anyone can do in our world is to bring people together.”

**SEEN. HEARD. RECOGNIZED**.

While I applaud each and every one of you for the impossibly hard work you do…. For the fortitude and the resilience you demonstrate every day, no matter what, working with a “**tough crowd,**” to put it mildly, I think what I envision for the future is that we make our jobs obsolete…. Now that might seem like a weird thing to say coming from someone like me…. I mean… we tackle **BIG** challenges… ones that will almost never be completely eradicated…. But I believe there’s a new future ahead and as we address the issues and problems on deeper levels, our mandates will be repurposed…. As the system evolves, I envision “repurposing our purpose.” We must find ways to use our energy… play to our strengths, and institute procedures and solutions that address and heal the core damage that causes the proliferation of the toxic actions we handle. I believe as we use our strengths, knowledge, common sense, and positive intention, the efforts we exert will conspire to heal the system…. Or at least make a substantial dent.

**SEEN. HEARD. RECOGNIZED**… whether or not we admit it, it’s what we all want in order to feel fulfilled. It’s time that we look into how we can use that simple process to heal.

I want to thank you all, once again, for including me in your spring conference and I am eager to celebrate the progress we achieve by working together!! Thank you!!