

“Keeping the Thing Going”: A Message for Pioneers, Trailblazers, and Other Visionaries

Good afternoon. I am truly honored to be here with you to celebrate [organization’s name] 40 years of achievements in the advancement of women, young people, and the community. It is organizations such as [organization’s name] that are key to our personal success and the continued cooperative spirit in our community.

As I look around the room, I can’t help but smile. First of all, you all look so good. More importantly, I’m smiling because of the success you convey. Looking into your eyes I can see the one characteristic that is common to all people who make a difference—passion. As pillars of the business community, you are making a momentous difference in the world. As African-Americans you are shaping the future of our community.

If you will allow me to do so, I’d like to speculate that the fire in your heart had a deep-rooted catalyst—that someone in our community whose words, beliefs, or life inspired you to become who you are today. Being introduced to the vision and becoming dedicated to its advancement is the trademark of our trek through history.

There were many people who influenced my decision to become a doctor. One in particular was James Derman, who in 1783 became the first African-American to practice medicine. He was the slave of several medical doctors and was basically inspired by one of his owners to take an interest in medicine. He became a nurse and eventually developed a *passion* for making sure the people in his community had a source for medical care, and opened his own practice—without obtaining a medical degree.

Times have definitely changed haven’t they? Can you imagine going to see a doctor who didn’t have credentials on the wall? Before they check your blood pressure, you might be inclined to ask him or her questions about their background and if the response didn’t include attendance and graduation from a medical school, you would probably walk right out his or her office and trot to another doctor’s office who had those basic credentials.

Of course, back then African-Americans were just so ecstatic to have one of their own as a doctor they didn’t worry about the details. I’m sure James Derman wanted his healing hands to reach all people, but was content to pave the way for others to realize his dream. I often look at the broad and diverse range of women that sit in the waiting room of my office and consider myself blessed for being able to be a part of his vision.

It may surprise you to know that many leaders never plan to lead. Instead, they find themselves in a position of leadership either out of a personal need or to simply help out those less fortunate.

Isabella Baumfree was such a trailblazer on both accounts. Her rise to leadership began with her frustration of the cruelty she experienced as a slave. One day she grabbed her daughter and simply walked off the job to start fighting for slave and women's rights. She eventually obtained her freedom and claimed that she had a vision from God that involved her changing her name and spreading the truth. Although her pursuit started out as personal, Sojourner Truth ended up becoming one of the most significant forces in our history and a trailblazer of the vision.

Please hear me. I am not suggesting that anyone must walk off his or her job to make a difference. That was just something that ignited the path for Sojourner Truth.

In one of her most famous speeches delivered in 1867 to the First Annual Meeting of the American Equal Rights Association, I think Sojourner hints at the goal of all of our efforts to further the African-American community. In speaking on the importance of fighting for rights for African-American women, Sojourner says, "So I am for keeping the thing going while things are stirring; because if we wait till it is still, it will take a great while to get it going again."

If in the midst of your own success you are asking yourself questions, such as what's going to happen in the future? What do we do now? Is the next generation prepared to lead our community? What next? Our community may be wallowing in our success and experiencing a stall in the movement. What can we do to get back on track? To answer this question we must first ensure our focus is on the vision.

What is the vision? If you were to ask Marcia the physician of 18 years, I would tell you that the vision is to promote health in all women. Marcia the African-American businesswoman, on the other hand, has a different definition of vision. I believe that there is a clear and definite expectation for me to be committed to "keeping the thing going" to ensure the African-American community remains on track to accomplish itself as a viable source of humanity.

Of course, the vision has never been as prominent as when it was orated by Martin Luther King Jr. He expressed the vision in the form of a dream. While he is known for being a great public speaker, he did more than simply express "feel good" rhetoric. He was committed to "keeping the thing going" and became a steadfast forerunner of civil rights. His message of non-violence and human equality could have easily fallen upon deaf ears. We are evidence that those who heard his message were listening and realized that they had to become messengers of "keeping the thing going" to make the dream a reality.

Have you ever wondered what path our history would have taken if Martin Luther King Jr. hadn't expressed his dream for the future and inspired us to dedicate our lives to "keeping the thing going"? I don't know and I'm glad we don't have to answer that question since his dream of a nation that does not judge by the color of the skin but by the content of character is being brought to life in us.

Accomplishments that benefit our community have not sprung solely from fighting for social equality. Economic expansion from business pioneers has also been significant to the advancement of the African-American community. Madame C. J. Walker, a trailblazer in the cosmetic industry, also had a dream. She suffered a scalp condition and dreamed of a magic formula that eventually lead to her becoming the first self-made female millionaire, black or white.

Her problem was solved and she made a lot of money. By all rights she could have easily just sit back and enjoyed the good life in her swanky mansion near the Rockefellers. She instead decided that “keeping the thing going” was the right thing to do and developed an enterprise that swept thousands of African-American women out of maid uniforms and into smart business suits to join her in business. She decided that “keeping the thing going” by joining the anti-lynching movement and fighting for discrimination against African-American soldiers was a contribution she could make for the benefit of the community.

Make no mistake in thinking that the lives of these early pioneers were glorious. Sojourner Truth often faced the threat of murder. Madame Walker was criticized and accused of attempting to change the natural appearance of African-American women to match those of white women. Martin Luther King was jailed several times and his life ended abruptly at the hands of an assassin.

Although obstacles had a definite presence in their lives, they persevered to see the vision through as far as they were allowed to travel. It is because of this that we are no longer living the dream. We are riding high on the wings of the vision. As a united people, we are more confident than ever and able to guide our own paths of success.

African-American pioneers are not only a feature of the past. Consider Ruth Simmons, the 18th president of Brown University, one of the most prestigious schools of higher learning in the country. She is the first African-American to serve as president of an Ivy League School. As a young woman, Ruth kept her dream of becoming a college administrator in focus because she knew that education was an essential economic tool for members of our community.

Many discounted Ruth’s dream because she was African-American, a woman, grew up poor. Ruth never let these opinions keep her from working hard to reach her goal. In fact, she reveals that the negative views only made her more diligent in her quest.

Ruth acknowledges that attaining her lifelong dream was not a single-handed feat, but an accomplishment that preceded her own life. When unanimously elected as president of Brown University, Ruth stated, “my ancestors are smiling.”

American Express president and chairman Kenneth Chenault is another “living pioneer.” Occupying the top position at a Fortune-500 company for the past seven years, Kenneth is breaking ground only accomplished by three other African-Americans. On Wall Street he is considered a genius. To us, he is another star in our crown of glory. In a speech he gave just before he took over the helm at Amex, Kenneth remarked, “a good plan and a good leader can overcome.”

The plan or vision for our community is good and begs for leaders to help us to overcome by “keeping the thing going.”

A leader in the most powerful position in America may very well be transitioned to an African-American. For the first time in history, an African-American is running for president and has a very good chance of winning. Your political views aside, I’m sure you will agree that Barack Obama’s run for presidency is historical and more importantly an indication that we must continue “keeping the thing going.”

Many have referred to Obama’s success in obtaining the support of diverse people as surprising. It should not surprise those of us in this room. We are business professionals in a diverse environment and live this every day.

Obama’s widespread appeal mimics that of Martin Luther King and he too is a proponent of “keeping the thing going.” One of his most profound quotes is that “If you’re walking down the right path and you’re willing to keep walking, eventually you’ll make progress.”

We all have the choice to stick to the status quo or to become dedicated to walk a path that continues the vision for progress in our community. For all of us in this room the choice is clear: We must embrace a personal vision that is committed to “keeping the thing going.”

Yes, we are all successful in what we do, but now is not the time to rest on our laurels. We have to remain steadfast in “keeping the thing going.”

It is our duty as visionaries to make sure that the youths in our communities do not become disconnected from the vision, but instead grab hold of our coattails as we move closer to the vision. Hopefully, they too will embrace the vision and surpass our greatest dreams.

There is still more work left to do. There is still more action to take. There are still more dreams to cultivate.

So, to the questions of the future, our best response is to devote ourselves to “keeping the thing going.” As long as our combined efforts continue to diminish the disparity between the promise that exists and the reality that we live every day, we should have faith that the vision will one day become a realization.

Through leadership, we must continue to move forward into the future.

Again, I commend [organization's name] on 40 years of accomplishments for the betterment of our community and invite you all to join me in "keeping the thing going."