



**GFD56 Speech-FINAL
Shari Runner**

It is humbling to stand before you this evening, at the start of a new century for the Chicago Urban League. On behalf of our board of directors, staff, auxiliaries and the thousands of people we proudly serve each year, thank you for sharing this evening with us. Your attendance is a testament to the vision of the Chicago Urban League; it is alive and well.

In the year since our last Golden Fellowship Dinner, we have all lived through an unparalleled climate of political divisiveness that marginalizes not only Black and brown people, but anyone who does not fit some people’s vision of a true American. And we know now more than ever what the specter of the loss of hard won rights looks like, and we know now, more than ever, that together, we matter.

To my daughters — my compound — my love for you is without end. In a world where we seem to be in constant turmoil, I am grateful that we can navigate it together. It is through you that I can envision a future beyond this moment in time.

And to the staff of the Chicago Urban League – the foundation of the League – there have never been more passionate, committed people who continue to prove that they are here because of their ability to simply believe. They envision the change that is possible.

And to the Board, who remain steadfast believers in this cause far beyond the calling of their “day jobs”—all of this is not possible without your unmitigated support.

The League’s outspokenness and advocacy over the years has drawn praise and applause from some but has also drawn the ire of others. My team and I

continue the League's legacy. We remain driven by our mission to pursue socioeconomic justice for those who do not have it, and we are willing to put everything we have into the effort.

Here in the City of Big Shoulders, it can often seem that racial inequities nudge their way into every corner of our lives, pushing a story that is unflattering to our city and unfair to all of us.

The League is at the forefront of contextualizing and changing this narrative. Through our Race and Equity initiative, launched last year, we are holding difficult conversations aimed at finding solutions to end structural racism. And to those who deny that our toughest challenges are rooted in race, in the words of California Congresswoman Maxine Waters, we say, "We are reclaiming our time."

For generations, Black and brown citizens have endured a continuum of injustice that has always been about America's original sin—racism—and our battle with the unconscious biases that underlie it.

A former police superintendent once told me: We all grow up with implicit biases, and we cannot expect people to operate without them. That's an excuse.

It's important to know that we are not powerless against our racial biases. Each of us must take responsibility for breaking down racial stereotypes, for they are where biases—and where the systemic problems that they justify—begin.

Unconscious biases have led to—and help maintain—an unjust system of racial oppression that devalues Black lives. The Chicago Urban League has worked to dismantle that oppressive system since our inception. So, when we recognized that Laquan McDonald's death was going to be swept away or forgotten — despite the revolutionary work done by the U.S Department of Justice and the Police Accountability Task Force — **we could not stand by and say nothing.**

The simple truth is that Laquan and Rekia, Tamir, and Trayvon cannot regain their time on this earth. We will never know what they could have accomplished. And we cannot afford to lose another future. Individually and collectively, we must raise our voices for them—and we must act now.

This is the very reason that, in July, we joined the landmark class action lawsuit to create a consent decree to stop practices that allowed racially discriminatory policing.

It is also why the League is committed to showcasing and enabling accurate portrayals of Black lives.

The narratives surrounding race and racism both reflect and enable unconscious bias—and they have become increasingly crucial in this era of digital communication. In the age of “fake news,” the constant flow of inaccurate or incomplete information contributes to real problems.

While viral videos of encounters with police on Facebook or weekly news reports of citizens shooting each other over the weekend may well be intended to call attention to the plight, they can also serve to normalize dehumanization. Especially when they are the only stories told about African Americans. It’s time to think differently about media balance.

It’s time for us to really differentiate between what is real and what is fake.

What is REAL is that every day, young black people are losing their lives because society continues to define them as expendable.

What’s FAKE is partisan bickering that leads to no change.

What is REAL is that the historical climate of racism has all too often been recast to create a sugar coated version of history to justify negative public perceptions.

What’s FAKE is pretending that biased policies and practices haven’t led to the current situation in Chicago.

What is REAL is that we must get to root causes, and we must reclaim our own narrative.

But we must also know that it will not be easy. Over the past year, for example, we have seen that even a symbolic gesture against racial oppression can be costly. Colin Kaepernick’s public demonstration of kneeling during the national anthem was meant to shine a light on the racial inequity that contributes to police brutality. And he has been punished for it.

You and I both know that the national attention Kaepernick's actions received had little to do with the level of respect he has for the American flag. Author, scholar, and civil rights leader Howard Thurman once said, "During times of war, hatred becomes quite respectable even though it has to masquerade, often under the guise of patriotism."

While we are not literally at war, it has seemed all too easy for many "patriotic Americans" to spew hatred toward Kaepernick, and those who have followed him, while making no effort to understand or acknowledge his cause.

Race-based hatred is nothing new. The fact that there are more than 917 white nationalist hate groups in America, including 32 in Chicago, that espouse white supremacist ideologies is not shocking. Organized hatred has been with us for many decades. What's troubling is how ambivalent much of America has been about it ... how ambivalent much of Chicago has been about it.

Our city can do things differently. I wouldn't be standing here today if I didn't believe that Chicago can be a national leader in showing how to prevent social injustices from occurring – and reoccurring -- with frightening frequency.

Each of us has an obligation to hold elected officials, policymakers, and other decision-makers accountable for advancing racial justice. We must acknowledge our collective past, and deal with it.

We must recognize that we have real problems that some people simply do not want to solve. The campaign slogan "Make America great again" strongly suggests that returning to whitewashed historic times—when the circumstances of Black and brown people were unquestionably more dire—is preferable.

But the reality is that change is here. It always has been. And with today's technology, it's moving faster than ever. Whether or not everyone likes it, there is no turning back. There is only change, resistance to change, and then more change.

There was a time in our nation's history when African-American women were the least employed and the most invisible. Now we are the most educated group in our country. That change did not occur by happenstance. The results of mass incarceration of African American men, the proliferation of guns in our

communities, the lack of options for employment, the necessity for Black women to ensure their families survived only mirror our history of more than 100 years. When other factors destroyed our ability to sustain families and create legacies, we kept going. Despite the narrative we often hear, the pursuit of education is a **true** African-American tradition. It has been largely through education—and certainly through resistance—that we continue.

And change continues. Let's talk about Katherine Powell, a student who participated in the League's Project Ready programs. Katherine was born in Chicago and wound up in the foster care system before she was taken in and raised by her grandmother, who nurtured her love of reading.

Throughout high school, she was an excellent student. She believed that college was in her future. As a high school junior, she joined Project Ready, where she participated in college tours and college readiness preparation. She set her sights on Princeton University, but she knew that her grandmother, who was on a fixed income, could not contribute to tuition. Through Project Ready, she took part in a free, 10-week ACT prep course and earned a score of 32 out of 36. When she received her acceptance letter—and full-ride scholarship—from Princeton, she and her grandmother called our program leaders before they shared the news with anyone else. They both credited the League with helping Katherine achieve her goal.

Katherine is now a sophomore at Princeton, majoring in English. She wants to be a writer. We know that she will do great things, but only because people will believe that her skill outweighs her skin color ... and that her opportunities should not be limited by her race, and because she will know her own power. And the League will continue to support her to make sure of it.

Ensuring that Katherine—along with many more like her—has a bright future should matter to all of us ...her success is all of our success ... because together, we matter.

As we enter yet another election season, we must recognize that the reckless rhetoric and steadfast ideology of politicians who aim to win at any cost, and for any party, is not a strategy to make our nation better. And we also know that citizen apathy is not a constructive or productive response.

Each of us in this room can be a leader. You don't have to be President, or Governor, or Mayor, or CEO to do what's right to improve lives in our city.

We just need to remain committed.

Let the resilience keep shining through each one of us.

You just need to remain focused.

Don't let these diversions confuse you.

And yes, WE just need to ... "Stay Woke."

Thank you.