



## Resilience and Resistance

### Responding to the Moment of Now, Building Safe and Hopeful Communities

I had the honor and privilege on August 22<sup>nd</sup> to speak at **the 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Cities United Convening** in Hampton, VA. Launched in 2011, **Cities United** is a national movement focused on eliminating the violence in American cities related to African American men and boys. This year's convening drew some 250 city leaders, mayors, advocates, and young people from across the country under the theme "*Reflect. Renew. Respond*," as we marked the pivotal historic event in 1619 that shaped the very fabric of this country and remembered the first Africans that were brought to these shores and sold as slaves in Virginia. I was asked to provide remarks on *Respond - The Journey Continues: Each generation responds to tradition and transitions by creating new tools for building safe, health, hopeful communities*.

Below is the text of my full remarks.

*In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. You got to love it, you! And no, they ain't in love with your mouth. Yonder, out there, they will see it broken and break it again. What you say out of it they will not heed. What you scream from it they do not hear. What you put into it to nourish your body they will snatch away and give you leavins instead. No, they don't love your mouth. You got to love it. This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I'm telling you. And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up. and all your inside parts that they'd just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark, dark liver--love it, love it and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize.*"— **Toni Morrison, Beloved**

Thank you, our beloved Toni Morrison, for giving us these words and reminding us to love ourselves. This morning, I want to share my thoughts on **Resilience and Resistance: Responding to the Moment of Now, Building Safe and Hopeful Communities**.

As Dr. Jolly shared with us last night we've got to reflect on our journey to understand our fire inside. So a little about my journey...

Earlier this year, I joined **D.C. human rights advocates and community leaders** and my CLASP colleagues at the **National Memorial for Peace and Justice** in Alabama. After going twice, I wanted to share what this meant to me as a black woman and an advocate working for youth and social justice.

## The National Memorial for Peace and Justice



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*“With no protection from the constant threat of death, nearly six million Black Americans fled the South between 1910 and 1970. Many left behind homes, families, and employment to flee racial terror as traumatized refugees. Lynching profoundly reshaped the geographic, political, social, and economic conditions of African Americans in ways still evident today.”*

### - The National Memorial for Peace and Justice

Reading this passage, overwhelming feelings of strength and sorrow moved up my spine. I immediately thought: *this is my story*. Born and raised in Philadelphia, I’m a daughter of Africa as well as the South.

## My Story... A Daughter of Philly



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I’m five generations removed from slavery and a granddaughter of sharecroppers. Eva R. Bird and Delinda Campbell, my grandmothers fled the south as part of the “Great Migration” – but their families were fleeing racial terror as traumatized refugees and looking for economic opportunity and freedom. Their existence is a monument to resilience and resistance.

## A Daughter of the South



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This is Charles Styles who owned my grandmother's grandmother, Amanda Styles in Quitman County Georgia. I often think after learning about him just a few months ago – what terror did he and his family pass on to mine? What wealth does his descendants have now as result of slavery? What did my great, great grandmother and her mother and siblings endure for me to even be here standing on TWO feet proud, black and beautiful?

## A Daughter of Africa



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It's been 50 years since Jim Crow formally ended, along with state-sanctioned apartheid in the American South and other parts of the United States. But the legacy of Jim Crow continues to be stifling. It feels like yesterday. It feels like now. These generational scars run deep. And as Michele Alexander writes in *The New Jim Crow*, the continuation of Jim Crow-like policies pours salt on open wounds. Congresswoman Ilhan Omar just recently said in a press conference supporting her sisterfriend Congresswoman Rashida Talib, *We will have our internal liberation carry us to our external liberation.*

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## Resilience. Resistance. Our Response.

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**We will have our internal liberation carry us to our external liberation - Congresswoman Omar**



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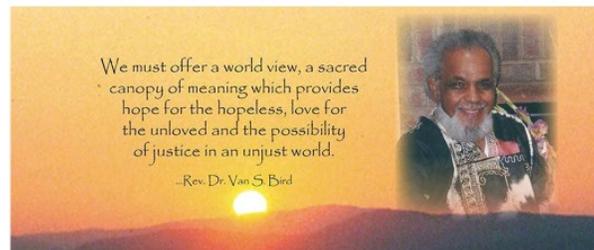
As a social justice advocate, I'm committed to eradicating policies that continue to harm black bodies. But stopping the harm is not enough. We need a vision of justice for descendants of enslaved Africans and all people in this country. So where do we begin?

Calling on my ancestors again, I see my Gramps who has taken to visiting me in my dreams lately. The Rev. Dr. Van S. Bird. Born in 1924 and raised in Waycross, Georgia. He wrote and lived his life by these words. *"We must offer a world view, a sacred canopy of meaning, which provides hope for the hopeless, love for the unloved, and the possibility of justice in an unjust world."*

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## Resilience. Resistance. Our Response.

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### **A few thoughts!**

**Be bold in our policy approaches to equity.** We need an intersectional approach to dismantle the systems of power that perpetuate inequity. Centermost should be the experiences of black people. **Incremental reforms are practical and important, but they're not sufficient to address historical and current oppression.**

So what are some TOOLS we are advancing?

- **Listen to and stand with young people.** At CLASP we are working with young adults of color across the country – making important connections to build social capital and networks; demystifying policy – it is not a boogeyman that is causing strife in your life and community. Public policies that are designed against you are part of the problem. And we working as partners with young adults to co-create policy solutions. Building multiethnic, multigenerational partnerships, relationships, movements. Shout out to Marlén and Whitney on the team!

### Listen to, Stand with Youth



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- **Focus On, Lift Up Overlooked Youth/Young Adults** – for example, Opportunity Youth – young people who are not working and not in school. 17.9 percent of Black youth, and 23.9 percent of Native American youth who are 16- 24 are not in school and working. We are working with national partners, such as Opportunity Youth United, and local communities to advocate for federal funding – protect, expand, and grow resources- through the Reconnect Youth Campaign, design better strategies in policy such as WIOA and other legislative vehicles based on listening to community leaders and young people on what works and what doesn't.

## Focus On, Lift Up Overlooked Youth/Young Adults



- **Working with state and local policymakers on an investment strategy.** Anthony charged us with thinking about what do we need to do to upstream. As I always say – what do we need to pour into communities? Into our young people? in addition to stopping the immediate hemorrhaging. This means large scale jobs investments, postsecondary pathways, redesigning education strategies to include restorative practices and reengagement, attention to healing, mental health and well-being, understanding and recognizing the trauma experienced by our young people and their communities . Shout out to Duy, Nia, and Isha and Noel on the team!
- **Bearing Witness.** We regularly convene and bring to conversations about policy, budget, and investments folks that are the real experts... flipping the script on who gets to lead and who gets to take space. Being the megaphone for communities, black and brown young men and women of color in Washington, DC and states and communities across the nation.
- **Be a Trojan Horse.** In one of our recent convenings on criminal justice and economic justice – someone said – I want to be the TROJAN HORSE that crushes the system. How are you in your role being a trojan horse?

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**End the slavery “loophole.”** While the 13th Amendment formally ended slavery, it includes a clause that’s been exploited to hurt black Americans. It reads: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” For people trapped in the criminal legal system and their families and communities... slavery and involuntary servitude remain very real. This is about us. Our families more than anything. Our boys and our men.

**Advance a radical, imaginative approach to reparations.** Reparations shouldn’t be a static, transactional process. It must consider the transatlantic slave trade, chattel slavery, Jim Crow, segregation and lynching, and a host of systematic policies that have economically persecuted and disenfranchised Black Americans. These include redlining, employment discrimination, and mass incarceration. Financial investments and new policies that recognize historical harms and address ongoing disparities.

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I'll leave you with one of my favorite quotes by the great Howard Thurman.

*Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.*

### Come Alive...



### Come Alive...



**Come Alive! Come Alive! Come Alive!** Thank you.