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Remarks presented by

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Thank you, Ms. Corrin [Gwendolyn Corrin, Executive Director of Communities in Schools in Newark] for that unbelievable introduction. Thank you for your service to children and to the Newark community over the last several decades. I first met Ms. Corrin over 20 years ago, and I stand here today because of people like you who modeled love and service in my life. Thank you so much. And thanks to the NJPAC, Larry Goldman, Sandy Bowie, and Sanaz [Sanaz Hojreh. Assistant Vice President of Arts Education at NJPAC] for the humbling honor of being asked to share some words today on the life and legacy of one of the great human beings the world has seen in the last 100 years.

The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in many ways was a low point in the history of America's experiment with democracy. Jim Crow racial apartheid governed the life of the country both by law and custom. Legally, virtually every aspect of American institutional life, particularly in the South, was racially segregated. Blacks could not vote, could not serve on juries, and had, in the South, no representation in any organ of government, whether local, county, or federal. In addition, segregation laws separated the races in virtually every aspect of public life: parks, pools, libraries, restaurants, schools, water fountains, public restrooms, hospitals, intimate relationships - essentially no element of public life permitted human interaction across racial lines. Even the afterlife wasn't exempt, as cemeteries, too, were segregated into Black and White.

But Jim Crow was not anchored only in the law. Social and cultural norms also worked interdependently with the law to reinforce and sustain segregation. These social norms served to ensure that no one would even think of challenging the infrastructure of

segregation. Even the slightest perceived challenge was met with swift and aggressive violence. Black citizens who even asked for information about registering to vote were beaten brutally, killed, and hung (these of course were the “strange fruit” that Billie Holiday sang eloquently about). Even the suggestion that a Black man glanced at a white woman was sufficient for particularly gruesome lynchings in which Black men were castrated. Conservative estimates provide that around 4000 African-Americans were lynched in the first half of the 20th century alone. And all of this was sustained with the tacit support of law – cop look other way; alert Klansmen and others when folks are released; cops arrived at the scene of a lynching after the crime was done and failed to charge anyone with an offense. So these social and cultural practices, in conjunction with the law, sent an unmistakable signal to anyone – Black, White, or otherwise – who dared to challenge the premise upon which segregation rested: think about it and you won’t live to tell about it. Moreover, this legal and social reality has been in place, by the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, for decades. To use language the Supreme Court had used in the Dred Scot decision, the practice of Jim Crow had been rooted in law and social custom for so long that it was axiomatic, acted upon habitually without even a thought that it was subject to question.

It is in this context that in the fall of 1955, a 40-year old seamstress in Montgomery, Alabama, who was a member of the local NAACP chapter, decided to challenge the edifice of Jim Crow segregation by saying “no” when asked to give up her seat so a white man could have the row to himself. She was cited and later arrested. Leading women in the community (seems like most important things are initiated by women) asked community leaders to take a stand against the continued indignities of segregation as illuminated by the buses. The NAACP President, the legendary E.D. Nixon, convened a meeting to discuss next steps. After heated debate, they asked a young pastor, who came to Montgomery barely a year earlier, to lead the effort.

This young man, born Michael King Jr., later changed to Martin Luther, was 26 years old, and had just obtained his Ph.D. from Boston University. They were impressed with how prepared he was academically and intellectually. He graduated from Morehouse college at 19. He

studied systematic theology at BU and had graduated with a Divinity degree from Crozer at 22, where he was valedictorian. They also liked the fact that he was new and didn't have deep relationships with the city elders. So they asked him whether he'd accept the call.

The community leaders, in effect, were asking Dr. King to ponder a grave, even ultimate question: what are you willing to die for? It was clear how segregated society handled those who dared challenge its assumptions. Barely three months prior, this message was reinforced vividly with the lynching and murder of 14-year old Emmett Till, who was beaten, shot in the head, and thrown in a river with a cotton gin tied around his head because he allegedly glanced or perhaps whistled at a white woman. It was clear that children weren't immune from capital punishment for even a casual breach of the norms and expectations of Jim Crow society. Yet these community leaders were asking King to publicly lead and sustain a campaign to challenge the longstanding prerogative of whites to preferential treatment on the buses.

So this was a life-and-death question; this was a question in which King was asked to put everything on the line. Not simply to run a soup kitchen or write a letter to the editor or write a check out of a discretionary account to support a cause he believed in. He was being asked to go all the way in. He was asked to put not only his life on the line but that of his new wife and daughter - both in the sense of the contours of their lives if their father was taken away from them, but even to the degree that their lives would be in jeopardy too. In Alabama, houses were regularly firebombed when any of its inhabitants dared challenge Jim Crow.

And he was asked to put his life on the line when he had a relatively comfortable set of alternatives before him. He was highly educated, with three degrees. He had aspirations of being a pastor and an academic, researching, teaching, writing with an appointment at a university, while pastoring a church. This is the course his Daddy had laid out for him, and his Dad was a prominent clergyman in the national Baptist church. His father implored his

son to focus on social-justice ministries through the church, rather than the kind of public work that more directly challenges the foundations of Jim Crow.

To all of this, King said: If I can be of service to the people, I will do so. He said this with a full understanding of the danger he was voluntarily agreeing to assume. He said this knowing that, by his choice, he had decided that he was willing to give up his life to pursue justice and serve others. He was willing to give up his life because he saw a system of racial apartheid premised on the notion that Black Americans were less than human, and which he believed caused Black children to believe they could not achieve the fullness of their potential. He was willing to give up his life because he saw a political system in which African-Americans were shut out, and thus left completely vulnerable to economic, social, and even physical repression. He was willing to give up his life because he saw a world filled with injustice, and he believed a life wasn't worth living if it was not deeply and personally committed to the loving pursuit of justice for all.

So he agreed to lead the bus boycott and he led it well. And the anticipated reaction came too. He was arrested and jailed within weeks. In the second month, his house, with his wife and baby girl in it, was firebombed. His life was threatened. But he persevered. In 1956, when the Supreme Court ordered an end to the segregation of buses in Montgomery, his father asked him to re-engage the church then, and to disengage from the fight against segregation. King doubled down, deciding to set up the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to fight segregation and injustice throughout the country. Within a year of that decision, he was stabbed in the chest, inches away from his heart. His house was firebombed again; he was arrested and imprisoned again. He was indicted on bogus tax charges in 1960, to join prior indictments for illegal boycotting and various traffic offenses.

He joined the sit-in movements in 1960; pursued segregation in Albany, Georgia in 1960 and 1961; supported the Freedom Riders in 1961. He then decided to pursue a campaign against segregation in Birmingham (known as "Bombingham" because of the frequent firebombs and murders of those challenging Jim Crow). He knew Birmingham was in many ways the heart

of Jim Crow and segregation. He was well aware of that. Though somehow he had made it that far, he felt uncertain he'd make it through Birmingham. He decided again to surrender his life on the altar of justice. He was imprisoned again; Birmingham spurred the nation's consciousness; and King made it out of Birmingham. But many others didn't, include four little girls who also gave their lives, as well as Medgar Evers, an NAACP leader in Mississippi, who was shot in the back in front of his home and bled to death in front of his wife and children.

But King kept going, each step of the way deciding to continue his life-sacrificing service in pursuit of justice for all. He next went to Selma, with 15,000 Black residents, but only 350 registered voters. He led the Bloody Sunday march. By the end of 1965, he had succeeded, along with many others, in obtaining the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. And, by the grace of God, he had survived. Many of them close to him thought this was a time when he could get out.

But he continued the fight for justice, pursuing it in the north in Chicago and turning his focus to issues of class and warfare, launching campaigns to challenge poverty and the war in Vietnam. His service ultimately brought him the ending he anticipated, but he recognized that "longevity has its place," and was willing to commit all in pursuing justice for those who had been denied it for so long.

It's important to emphasize that King not only put his physical life on the line for his commitments to justice, he also put his mental health and character on the line too. He recognized that public leadership of the kind he pursued meant necessarily that his character would be exposed to constant, unmerited attack. Black progressives called him too conciliatory; establishment Black leadership called him too aggressive and insufficiently respectful of their prerogatives; white liberals called him a communist; white conservatives called him an anarchist. He was under FBI surveillance for a decade, including wiretap surveillance for six years. King sacrificed his entire being in service of others. Indeed, after his death, when the examiner conducted the autopsy and examined his heart, he found that

King, killed at 39, had the heart of a 60-year old. King literally not only gave his body to the cause of justice, he gave his heart too.

Moreover, King's life is instructive not only for the nature of his sacrifice in service of justice, but also in the loving way he pursued justice. The more people hated him, attacked him physically or in terms of his character, the more he sought to love them and embrace them. His use of nonviolent strategies wasn't simply tactical; it was a reflection of his character. He said eloquently that "Love is the only solution to the problems of man." He loved his way to justice, even while so many hated him and hated on him, along the way.

So what does this all mean for us? I suggest that if we're honest with ourselves, just like King faced a call when E.D. Nixon and others asked him to take up the mantle of leadership in 1955, we too face a call. Will we accept it? What are we willing to die for? What will we sacrifice for the cause of justice? Are we like the tippers at the coffee shop (only willing to put it on our leftovers)? Willing only to do what is easy and supplemental? Or are we willing to surrender the core of who we are and what have in pursuit of justice? What are you willing to die for? What are you willing to commit to deeply and comprehensively? What are we willing to sacrifice for in the true meaning of the word, in that we surrender not merely what's extraneous or discretionary, but what's fundamental and even essential? And are we willing to do it lovingly? Are we willing to actively seek common ground and understanding with those with whom we might disagree? Or would we rather revert to our corners, and so demonize and delegitimize those with opposing views that they become enemies, worthy of contempt and, even worse, elimination?

I don't think we discuss the legacy of Dr. King without wrestling with the questions of sacrifice and love in pursuit of justice. And from my vantage point, as the President of the School Board in the Newark - the largest school district in the state - we have much work to do.

We know that effective schools have always been at the heart of our nation's continued struggle against racial inequity. And King was motivated in fighting segregation substantially because of the signals segregation sent to young Black children about their capacity. Yet the achievement gap is largely unchanged since King's death in 1968. In fact, about half of African-American and Latino students graduate from high school, and that under-sells our challenge, as large numbers of these kids obtain their diploma through alternate procedures because they don't have the proficiency to pass the high-school exit exam. Moreover, even the slice of Black and Brown students attending college infrequently graduate from four-year colleges and universities.

So in the year 2010, when our young people face a highly integrated, global economy in which knowledge and information will determine their viability, we can barely get young people out of college. That's a crisis; that threatens the capacity of these young people to fulfill their immense potential. It threatens to lock in young people of color to the bottom rungs of our economic and cultural life. That's a threat to justice. Will you answer the call? What are you willing to give up? Are you willing to truly and consistently dedicate those parts of you and your resources that you'd rather not. Are you willing to serve until it hurts? And are you willing to do it lovingly? Are you willing to love your enemies? Are you willing to actively seek cooperation with your opponents, even if you otherwise disagree?

On this day, when we seek to honor the legacy of Dr. King, we must ask ourselves what we're willing to sacrifice and commit to loving pursue the cause of justice. The example of Dr. King is clear. In his last words, he emphasized that "like anybody, he would love to live a long life." And, by implication, he was saying "like anybody," he'd love to spend most of his time taking care of his four children; "like anybody," he'd love the easier route of engaging in service that's easy and temporary." "Like anybody," he'd love to live a life free from the never-ending stresses of sacrificial service. But ultimately his commitments to justice were more important. The life of Dr. King asks us whether we will accept the call of sacrificial service. There has been much progress since the time of King, but we still face a broad host of injustices along lines of race, class, gender, religion and otherwise. We faced

policy challenges around education, jobs and the economy, health care, and our family life, among other areas. Injustice is all around us.

So the question today is simple: **"Will you accept the call?"** I pray you will. God bless you.