It was America’s promise of fairness, equality and justice that Rosa Parks was standing for when she refused to give up her seat on that bus some fifty-five years ago.

It was the belief in equality before the law, a just wage for an honest day’s work, and universal access to social services that sustained Cesar Chavez as he walked the dusty roads of California’s Imperial Valley organizing migrant workers.

It was the courage of Joseph Cardinal Ritter to integrate the St. Louis parochial schools six years before “Brown vs. the Board of Education” cut down “separate but equal” as the organizing principle of America’s educational system.

It is the vision of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the courage of Morris Dees, and the example of Congressman John Lewis that brings us to this Freedom Fund Dinner.

Good evening. Thank you for the invitation to be with you tonight.

And thank you Pastor Adams for that beautiful rendering—we all can relate to the theme; no one of can make it alone…

Thanks to Analise and congratulations on your accomplishments—so many for one so young—Creighton NAACP President, your work with STDS and AIDS education; your actions to get out the vote and to defeat the ban on affirmative action—all while being on the dean’s list at Creighton. We are proud of you.

When Tommie and John Pierce asked me to speak tonight, I initially demurred, believing others had more important messages; however, on reflection, as a long time member of the NAACP, I do have a few thoughts to share, observations to make and challenges to offer. I am aware that some of you may not agree with me, but I am ok with that!

While acknowledging and celebrating the successes and the progress of the past, built on the tears, pains, and efforts of our forbearers, we are not home yet! There is much to do. As the NAACP enters its 100th year, as the nation is poised for one of the most historically significant elections ever, we are not yet home; we are not yet one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

Tonight as we look forward we remember an Omaha when street cars, swimming pools, department stores, educational opportunity, and jobs were segregated because of race. We remember the brave citizens of north Omaha, students of Creighton University, Father Capt. Markoe, the De Porres Society and the Omaha Star, drawing a line in the sand and saying “No more.” This group of courageous Omahans pioneered the sit-in technique later used throughout the country in the 1960’s. We celebrate their courage tonight and we bless their memory. At the same time, it should be noted, Whitney Young was President of Omaha’s Urban League.

The mission and the vision of the NAACP is to “Ensure the political, educational, social and economic equality of rights of all persons and to eliminate racial hatred and racial discrimination.” These are the very rights we aspire to celebrate tonight.
If “Unity Through Diversity” is the theme of tonight’s dinner, we have some work to do; it is not a question of diversity—look around—but it is a question of unity.

A recent Associated Press/Yahoo poll (conducted by Stanford) shows “a substantial portion of white America still harbors negative feelings towards blacks. It shows black and white disagree tremendously on how much racial prejudice exists, whose fault it is and how much influence blacks have on politics.”

However, this same poll had positive findings as well. More whites apply positive attributes to blacks than negative ones, and blacks are even more generous in this description of whites. Racial prejudice appears to be lower among college-aged whites living outside the south…that is a majority in this country--so this is a starting point.

In this glass half empty, half full scenario, the opportunity for cooperation and collaboration has never been better. This is a time for leadership and local engagement.

In my earlier reference to Rosa Parks, Cesar Chavez, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the De Porres Society, I was referring both to the persons and the actions, the leadership and the courage. Three years ago in Detroit, Senator Obama asked where did this courage come from, how was this leadership sparked?

He did not know and, tonight, I do not have the answer either; we both know “it is worth reflecting upon because the challenge we face today may not be lunch counters, water fountains or swimming pools – but they still require this unselfish courage. The battle lines may have shifted and the voices to equality may be new, but what is not new is the need for everyday heroes to stand up and speak out for what they believe is right.” (Obama 2 of 5)

Today’s issues are not going to be resolved by the government, local school boards or by NAACP chapters, without individual responsibility to encourage, challenge and lead! The solutions are not top-down initiatives. Such efforts are necessary but insufficient. The top-down approach often leads to resistance. The solutions are found in you and me; at the grass roots level.

Obama also said, “That in America, ordinary citizens can somehow find in their hearts the courage to do extraordinary things. That change is never easy, but is always possible. And it comes not from violence or the kind of politics that pits us against each other and plays to our worst fears, but from great discipline and organization and from a strong message of hope.” (Obama 4 of 5)

The diversity issues of today challenge our values, assumptions, morals and character. The only way to sustain a culture of changed patterns, a culture of inclusion and diversity, is to dig deep within our roots and abandon old traditions, assumptions and values. This is hard work, but the pay-off is huge. Change will come only from the heart; an enlarged collective heart holds the key to our national and local success.

If I took a poll of this audience tonight, I believe I would find consensus that some of our community’s most challenging issues revolve around health care and the uninsured, equality of education, crime and organizing for the pending election and defeating the anti-affirmative action initiative; not forgetting, of course, economic development; but that must wait for another time. Let’s look at three familiar issues.

- **Health Care:** Being a health care provider, the issues facing adequate health care are daunting and getting more so as the economy tanks. Some specific challenges are to ensure access to high-quality affordable health care; to address racial disparities and access to health care; to eliminate disparities in HIV/AIDS education; reduce obesity disparities and related diseases—diabetes, hypertension and heart
disease; and to promote good mental health practices and programs. Both presidential candidates have presented their take on health care reform—managed care or universal coverage? The choice will be ours!

- **Education**: This is no stranger to Omaha in the post learning community environment. Yet we must be realistic about the disparities that exist in education: school resource equity; increasing teacher quality; promoting parental and family engagement and enhancing early childhood and literacy initiatives. Omaha is moving in the right direction in addressing these issues. OPS and the other districts, the learning community and Building Bright Futures, in concert with UNO and Creighton are working to redress the imbalance of equity in K-12 public education.

From a higher education perspective there is the need to increase financial aid, to lobby for increased Pell grants, TRIO funds, and work study support; to lobby states for increased assistance for college bound students; private scholarship sources like Building Bright Futures will be especially helpful for community college students; and at the same time create campus environments supportive of minority students; and ensure strong tutoring and mentoring programs.

This year’s freshman class at Creighton is 24% students from under-represented groups and 25% first in their family to attend college. This is the result of a five-year effort to identify, attract and retain students of color. Our graduation rate places Creighton in the top 4% of all institutions in the USA. As an aside, I am convinced that racial and ethnic diversity in higher education contributes to the learning experience of all students on campus, and to the civic, social, and economic life of our society as a whole.

- **Violence**: Seven days, six homicides – be these actions centered around gangs or drugs or domestic violence, it is too much and it has to stop. Resources must be made available to make our streets safe; and not just in north Omaha. Programs like Ceasefire, gang interventions and heightened police patrol are part of the solution. The other part is responsible citizenship and civic engagement as citizens in all parts of Omaha need to help solve this epidemic of human carnage.

- **Voter Registration**: The NAACP states that as an organization, their goal is to make the promise of this country real for all families and that starts with making all Americans regular and registered voters.

Today only 69% of African Americans are registered. This year’s election takes on a greater urgency than usual in Nebraska. Presidential choices aside, Nebraska is faced with a possible ban on equal opportunity programs and a roll back of affirmative action. I am personally gratified by the efforts being made on the Creighton campus by students of all political persuasion to get out the vote and to educate many first time voters. And I am sure that is the case on other Nebraska campuses.

Our history shows that in American democracy, not all people are free and equal, despite what we claim. But it has been noted, that “What makes America great, is that we as a society believe we should address such harms and change the inequalities that exist; affirmative action stands for that change.”

Affirmative action guarantees nothing to any member of any minority group. The policy does not promote any single person at the cost of another. Rather affirmative action seeks to level the field for those people who have been systematically excluded and burdened by our institutions.

Hence, affirmative action is remedial; it is not discriminatory. It is a reminder that not all Americans have benefited from the economic and social opportunities of this great country. It is disheartening that
Nebraska is now considering a reversal of this modest effort to address the failure of our history. Let us hope that is not the case!

Let me summarize these issues in an historical context: in 1908 issues were discrimination, disenfranchisement, lynchings, denial to health care and education. In 2008 we still find residuals of discrimination, voter apathy, gun and gang violence; drugs and health care disparities. Some things never change, even in the greatest country in the world!

While working to build a more inclusive and diverse community we all have a role to play. It has been noted that “Diversity is counting people and inclusiveness is making people count.”

As an aside: diversity is a social fact in the USA, given the racial, ethnic and cultural mix of the citizenry. Inclusiveness goes beyond opening the door of opportunity it also involves sensitivity, access and fairness. It has been noted that “Diversity does not equal inclusiveness. Inclusiveness is more proactive; it is a never ending process.”

Fostering a diverse and inclusive society, organization, or work place is a leadership issue.

It was a diverse group of folks who established the NAACP in 1909—they were black and white, Jewish and Christian, social workers, journalists and lawyers. They united, they came together to challenge the civic and moral issues of that day.

Tonight we stand on their shoulders; they paved the way; but we must show the courage, the tenacity, the sense of moral outrage that they showed as we address the issues of our day.

Again, building a diverse and inclusive community is a leadership issue. The challenge is to each of us. For Omaha to be a truly great and prosperous city, we must provide opportunities to fully utilize the gifts and talents of all our citizens.

Responsibility for such an important issue cannot be delegated; you must lead from the top. Walk the talk and work the work. For the employers in the room, to build a diverse and inclusive work force should be a strategic priority for every business in Omaha, if for no other reason, than shifting demographics will dictate it.

At the same time fostering a diverse workforce pays huge dividends with minimal effort. It has been noted that “In a functionally multicultural society, people believe it is in their best interest that diversity exists.” Diversity is a strength; it yields more creative, synergistic and effective outcomes. A diverse work place is also more interesting, energizing, informative and educational. Diversity is ultimately good for business…note the progress made at Woodman of the World since 2002.

Finally, evenings like tonight have a purpose. They serve as exhortations, repeating what we have heard many times before, but it is worth repeating because if nothing else, it reminds us of our responsibility to teach each other to work for a more just, inclusive, humane and harmonious future for all of our brothers and sisters.

Tonight your presence validates for me three of my favorite quotations from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

He said: “We cannot walk alone.” Look around, we are not making this journey without the support of others here in Omaha and beyond.
He said: “We cannot turn back.” Your presence here is testimony that you are walking and working into the future.

Now I end with my favorite quote from Dr. King drawn from a sermon entitled “Unfulfilled Dreams.” A bit of background:

It is based on the story from Hebrew scripture of King David’s failure to complete a temple to house the Ark of the Covenant.

Dr. King reminds us that we all start but do not finish many ventures in the course of our life. But he notes:

“Well, that is the story of life. And the thing that makes me happy is that I can hear a voice crying through the vista of time saying: It may not come today, or it may not come tomorrow, but it is well that it is within your heart.

“It is well that you are trying. You may not see it. The dream may not be fulfilled, but it is good that you have the desire to bring it into reality. It is well that it is within your heart.”

And so it is for each of us gathered here. It is well that the dream is within your heart. Thank you for being with us tonight. May the vision of the NAACP shine brightly in your heart as it does in mine.

Thank you.

John P. Schlegel, S.J.
President
Creighton University