

Good Morning,

My name is Marie Brown-Mercadel and I am the Director of the Health and Human Services Agency representing the East and North Central Region. I would like to give thanks to the African American Association of County employees for hosting this wonderful event and asking me to speak. I am honored to talk to you today about moving forward. I hope that some part of my message resonates with you and inspires you on your journey. I would also like to acknowledge Cecil Steppe and Leon Williams for the path the two of you have forged for many of us as we move through our careers with the County.

The National Registry of Juneteenth organizations and supporters launched a 150—year anniversary campaign to raise awareness of the contributions African-American leaders have made to society. The focus areas for the Registry include **education, social responsibility, and self-improvement**. For the last century-and-a-half African Americans have made tremendous strides. From the leadership of those such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Colin Powell, Mae Jemison, Charles Bolden, Kamala Harris, Booker T. Washington, Thurgood Marshall, Loretta Lynch, and of course, President Obama, we can all acknowledge that opportunities are available for those striving to advance.

On June 19th, 1865, President Lincoln physically emancipated the slaves. The question I want to ask you today, and you don't have to answer out loud, is this: Have you been psychologically emancipated? A few weeks ago I was having dinner with some close friends. I asked the question "the work you are doing today, is it your passion? 100% of the people answered "No". This was both an honest and a disturbing answer. My next question was "why"? The answers were varied, time, fear, obligations, and just life circumstances in general. If I can share my personal values with you right now I would say that those reasons were **excuses, justifications, defenses, and apologies**.

You might be saying to yourself—easy for you to say, you are an executive. You have it made. Let me tell you a little about my story. My father, born in 1925 was a no nonsense kind of guy. As a single father he raised me and my 6 siblings. In the 70's a single father was somewhat of an anomaly. My Dad was a United States Marine for over 25 years, enlisting during World War II to serve his country during a time when African American Marines were segregated from the white Marines. The initial intent of the Marine Corps was to discharge these men after the war ended and reestablish an all-white force. The Montford Point Marines, as they were called, were assigned to tasks such as stocking supplies, cooking, cleaning, and other roles that did not represent their actual skills. As many of the Montford Point Marines did, my Dad endured working for an organization that

didn't appreciate his skills.

Rising through the ranks, he earned a retirement pay that allowed him to raise me and my siblings. My father taught me the value of hard work. He didn't like excuses. He wanted action. And he expected more from me than I thought I had to give. Fast forward approximately 70 years after my father enlisted in the Marine Corps, and 25 years after his death, Congress unanimously passed legislation that honored the 20,000 Montford Point Marines with a Congressional Gold Medal of Honor for the service they provided to this country. My father's service and sacrifices paved the way for me to have an equal opportunity to succeed.

As a 26 year old divorced single parent of a 4 year old daughter, I decided to finish my undergraduate degree at North Carolina Central University, the best Historically Black University in the HBCU network! It was there that many brilliant African American professors reinforced what my father taught me. I grew up in a middle class neighborhood and I had never seen an African American with a doctorate until I went to NCCU. I was in complete awe and I knew then that one day I would get my own doctorate- one way or the other. I studied psychology at the under graduate and graduate level while working fulltime and sometimes taking my daughter to class because I was without a babysitter. I started out working as a direct care technician in a facility that served children with developmental disabilities. I am fortunate to have held positions as the Regional Manager in North Carolina, Chief of Staff for the Louisiana Department of Family and Children's Services, Chief Administrative Officer for St. John the Baptist Parish, Director of Home and Community Based Services for Dallas Metrocare, and my current position of the Director of HHSA.

These titles didn't come without sacrifices. Or bumps. Or hard times. I never said progress is easy. In some instances over the past 25 years in management I have not been fully accepted by others in my role. I have walked into meetings and introduced myself to those in the room. The large majority of the time everything has been fine. But—there have been instances where the reaction was “oh-you are the chief of staff”, “you are the chief administrative officer”, and “you are the director”? A few times I laughed to myself, a few times I sighed, and sometimes, I was pissed. However, I knew that I could not feed into the perceptions others had of what the person in my role should “look like” or “be like”. Everyone is not going to accept you. Get over that. I let my skills, my education, and my dedication to serving people speak for itself.

Let's be clear. There are many barriers that we need to overcome. I am a news junkie. I wake up to the news. I check my news on my phone; I listen to KPBS in my car. I watched the happenings in Ferguson, Baltimore, Florida, and South Carolina over and over again. I

felt hopeless, I felt paralyzed, I felt angry, and I felt pain. But most of all, I felt a personal responsibility to do everything I could to make my community better through my work.

One of the focus areas for the Registry is self-improvement. How can each of you honor the legacy of our ancestors by making improvements within yourself? Within your community? How many of you are members of AACE or another volunteer organization? Lastly, how can you push yourself to the very end of the limits to change your own circumstances? What are you willing to do to experience the passion of doing what is important to you? Take the necessary steps to prepare yourself so you can do what you are passionate about. Maximize your skills, your talents, your education, and your experience.

Three-and-a-half years ago I had just returned to San Diego and my husband deployed to the Middle East for the 5th time. I had to find something to do; I had this nagging voice in my head reminding me of my ultimate goal. I enrolled in a doctoral program to study organizational leadership and management. While working beyond fulltime and helping my daughter with my twin grandchildren, I have managed to maintain a 3.8 GPA; I was recently inducted into the Delta Mu Delta National Honor Society; I am in the top 2% of the entire student body at the University of Phoenix; I am writing Chapter 4 of my dissertation, and I am hoping to graduate by January of 2016. I have tried to maximize every opportunity I have been given. I hope you will too.

Martin Luther King Jr. said “A man can’t ride your back unless its bent”. So stand up. Rise above the bumps in your past, the very real bumps that exist in the present, the adversities, the images on the evening news, and the hype. Live up to your own expectations. Make it happen. Every day that goes by is another day of **Excuses. Justifications. Defenses. Apologies.**

This is one of my favorite quotes: For whatever it is worth, it is never too late to be whoever you want to be. I hope you live a life you are proud of, and if you find that you’re not, I hope you have the strength to start over”. F. Scott Fitzgerald.

I will leave you with the question I asked earlier: Have you been psychologically emancipated?

Thank you, Live Well!