

In May 2004, Vincent C. Gray announced his candidacy for the Ward 7 Council Seat. On November 2, citizens of that Ward elected him as their representative on the Council of the District of Columbia. Below is the speech given by Gray during the January 2, 2005 Swearing In Ceremony held at the Washington Convention Center.

Congresswoman Norton, Mayor Williams, Chairman Cropp, my Other Colleagues on the Council, Honorable Judges, and all those assembled here today, especially the many from Ward 7 who made the pilgrimage to be part of this occasion. To my friends and professional colleagues, to my family, particularly my son Carlos, my daughter Jonice and son-in-law Stacy, my mother in-law and father-in law who have been like parents to me. And to my brother who is my only sibling and, in a wonderful coincidence, today is his birthday.

Today marks yet another milestone in a journey that began nearly a year ago with an exploratory process involving a handful of people. That process translated into a campaign, which ultimately embraced more than 250 volunteers whose efforts were nothing short of remarkable as they worked day after day to win support for our candidacy. To be sure, I was truly a group project, and that is about as good as it gets.

I thank the voters of Ward 7 for their confidence in me. I stand here today proud to be a native Washingtonian; proud to be a K-12 graduate of this city's public schools; proud to have graduated from George Washington University at a time when that was a daunting experience for an African-American; proud to have enjoyed opportunities to serve our city in organizations such as the Association for Retarded Citizens, the Department of Human Services and Covenant House; and now very proud to be the full-time Councilmember representing the wonderful people of Ward 7.

Moreover, I also am proud to be part of what arguably is the most colorful Council in history with Orange now being joined by Brown and Gray as we create our own version of a rainbow. Ward 7 has enormous potential. Its magnificent vistas are comparable to any in this city. And the people who live there are talented, accomplished, resourceful and as deserving as anyone.

We ran our campaign on a set of broad themes and it is my intent to work hard at every one of them. We ran on a principle of inclusion. And we intend to operate that way on the Council. There was an important place at the table for anyone who wanted to be a part and that will continue to be our operating principle as we now take office.

Management Guru Peter Drucker once said, "The best way to predict the future is to create it." Hopefully then, we can envision and work toward a Ward 7 in which our children are successfully educated, health care is effective and accessible, housing is affordable to those who

wish to move here or remain our neighbors, economic development comes to all the neighborhoods of our Ward and people feel safe in their homes and communities.

Let's be clear, at the heart of our progress must be a **restored public education system**. A publicly operated, publicly accountable education system is the bedrock of the American educational experience.

- We have a new Superintendent of schools and I hope we will give him a full opportunity to implement new uniform standards and to succeed. All too often our patience is short, demanding major progress in unrealistically brief periods. These problems did not occur overnight nor will they be fixed overnight.
- We must recognize that the ability of children to learn often is stymied by the health and social problems they bring to school. Schools need to be hubs where not only an education is provided but also **health and social services** are offered so that children have a reasonable chance to learn. When I was Director of the Department of Human Services we began the Turning Points Programs, which did just that. Today, that same concept is referred to as Wrap-Around Services.
- We should develop and implement an **accreditation program** for individual public schools so that there are incentives and rewards for achieving established standards, rather than merely punishment for failing to make the mark.
- Because of the breakdown in our families, schools should become places where the fourth "R" is taught. Reading, 'Riting and 'Rithmetic should be part of a curriculum that also offers **Rearing**, as children are taught, beginning at the kindergarten level, how to be responsible parents.
- And we must **restore vocational education** to our curriculum. At one time, we had seven vocational schools in this city. Today, none exists as a vocational education center. And we are paying the price with epidemic level dropout rates replete with young people who, while they had no desire to go to college, also have no marketable job skills. We decry the absence of our young people on the many construction sites around the city. Yet, what have we done to prepare them for these well-paying jobs?

Our **Health Care System** surely requires resuscitation. In my opinion, D.C. General Hospital never should have been closed. That shutdown added to an already worsening situation. At one time, we had four hospitals serving the eastern end of the city. Capital Hill closed, Hadley Memorial closed and then D.C. General was closed, leaving only Greater Southeast. Together, we must work for a new hospital as part of a comprehensive health care system that

includes a strong network of clinics, which establishes medical homes for residents. And we also need more incentives like tuition abatements and tax credits to encourage health care practitioners to work in east of the river communities.

The **Affordable Housing** crisis also is worsening. Without strong policy leadership, Ward 7 is poised to be the next foray. Ward 7 needs a mix of housing to ensure a home for people of all income strata. Large public housing developments are disappearing, but what is happening to those who are displaced? And we must ensure that our seniors, who now number 12,000 in Ward 7, do not lose their homes to increasing property values and the rising property taxes that follow. Inclusionary Zoning, Strategically Developed Property Tax Caps, and Partial Property Value Disregards are some of the ways we can address these issues.

Economic Development in Ward 7 clearly has lagged in comparison to other Wards. We deserve restaurants, theaters and the other amenities that come with life in the 21st Century. The citizen-driven Skyland Shopping Center must be at the top of our agenda as the prototype for new Ward 7 development, along with the Anacostia Waterfront Initiative. And the Nannie Helen Burroughs-Division Avenue Corridor should be a high priority as well. Presently, we have just one sit-down restaurant in the Ward. Frankly, I am sick of our retail economy being defined as hair, nails, fast food and check cashing.

At the core of our work must be a responsive constituent services operation. Resident calls and letters deserve a response. And they will get one. I will be at meetings across the Ward, as I have been for months. We will have an office in the Ward. And we will develop opportunities to bring leadership together regularly and systematically.

Major League Baseball and the question of a publicly financed stadium has dominated our lives for the past several months. And frankly, it has been one of the most taxing issues to face this city in recent memory. And while the drama unfolded, some of us had to sit in the dugout, despite a repeated plea to “Put Us in the Game Coach.” Whether one favors or opposes a publicly supported stadium, there is no denying the reality of our crumbling school buildings, the dismal and disgraceful condition of our library system, and the need for more recreation centers like the recently completed Hillcrest and Fort Davis facilities.

There is no denying that our health care system is on life support and it is past time for us to get off the top ten list of health problems. There is no denying that the cost of residing in this city is outstripping many who have devoted decades to the District. There is no denying that significant economic development has yet to reach many of the neighborhoods, especially communities East of the River. And no denying that the Anacostia Waterfront Initiative, left

unmonitored, once again could relegate East of the River needs, interests and aspirations to second-class status.

And so, if I may be so bold, as a Councilmember with barely ten minutes of experience, I wish to challenge our Mayor and the 13 of us on this Council to immediately reconstitute all the vigor that was devoted to a baseball stadium and together:

- Let's not take a walk, especially an intentional walk, on basic human need in this city.
- Let's single out the vital quality of life issues affecting our children and adults and seriously address them in 2005.
- Let's Double Our Resolve . . . Triple Our Energy . . . Go to Bat for a mission to improve a human condition that has poverty and functional illiteracy at epidemic levels.
- Let's step up to the plate for our children so that scores of young people do not continue to be left in the Batter's Box of Life.
- Let's go the distance for all our people.

And, if we do, maybe, just maybe, we can hit a homerun that everyone can cheer about.

Thank You!

Vincent C. Gray has served as Executive Director of Covenant House Washington since January 1995. While he will remain involved in the activities of the agency, he will officially step down from this post January 21, 2005. Judith Dobbins, former Director of Program Services for Covenant House Washington, will serve as Interim Executive Director until the Board of Directors appoints a new Executive Director. Dobbins has been with Covenant House Washington for seven years.