

Greater Cincinnati Commitment Rollout Talk – November 11, 2008

Good Morning! Welcome to the roll-out of the Greater Cincinnati Commitment. I'm Al DeJarnett, a member of the Cincinnati Association where I serve on the Executive Committee and co-chair the Community Inclusion Panel. Sue Wilke is my fellow co-chair. She could not be with us today as she is organizing the follow-up meeting at the University of Cincinnati.

I'm speaking to you today as a representative of the Greater Cincinnati Commitment Alliance, eighteen organizations, including Cincinnati, with very diverse constituencies that have one important thing in common. We agree that we want to live in a community that affirmatively commits to a fair deal for everyone. Fair in education, fair in employment, fair in treatment before the law, fair in access to health care, fair in access to housing and fair in encouraging all its citizens to aspire and achieve their dreams.

We have the great fortune of good timing as we meet here today. Just one week ago people across this country declared that race has lost its place as a disqualifier for the highest job in the land. Just one week ago. People around the world took note and celebrated. There were celebrations in London, in Cairo, in Paris, in Jerusalem, in Rome, in Tokyo, in Athens, in Madrid, in Jakarta, in Mombasa, in a little Kenyan village called Kogelo, where Grandmother Obama lives. A small city in Japan that had the good luck to also be named Obama was overjoyed.

And there was quite a party in Grant Park. I had the personal joy of text messaging with my daughter, Simone, a freshman at Northwestern University, as she witnessed history in Grant Park. Just one week ago, across the entire world, the American dream of opportunity for everyone regained a lot of the luster that it had lost in recent decades.

On a more local note, we can take pride that 52% of Hamilton County voted for the change represented by President-elect Obama. That's a very encouraging sign for what we assemble here to do today.

While the election gave us a new national consensus that race or skin color has lost its place of power and is no longer a disqualifier for an otherwise outstanding candidate for President of the United States, we may not be able to make the same statement about other historical disqualifiers. What about being a woman, or a Jewish person, or a Hispanic person, or an Asian American, or a gay man or a lesbian, or a Muslim? Do you think that we as a nation have ruled out these descriptors as disqualifiers for the public trust?

But let's bring the question home. Is Greater Cincinnati a place where anyone can be anything their God-given talents, ambition and hard work can make them? We in the Alliance say "not yet". Your presence says you might agree with us. We also think your presence here also says you want to help make our community that kind of place. The members of the Greater Cincinnati Commitment Alliance believe the Commitment can help get us there if we believe and act to make it a vital part of our personal and community values.

We believe it's time to restore some of the luster that our city and region have lost over the past few years. We can attract all the large conventions in the world. We can even have year after year of winning sports seasons. But if we are a community that is narrow of mind and small of heart, we lose.

We lose because visitors will come once, but they won't come back if they don't feel good about the experience. We lose because people who have unpleasant experiences return home and tell their friends who then take

Cincinnati off their lists. We lose because our employers have difficulty attracting the talent to keep them vital and innovative. We lose because our economic development organizations have difficulty attracting the entrepreneurs and new businesses needed to grow our local economy. We lose because we are a diverse community and smallness of heart and narrowness of mind in the way we treat each other will only create resentments that periodically erupt in the ways we've already seen too much of.

Well, let's win. Let's make the Commitment an integral part of the way we deal with each other in Greater Cincinnati. Let's revisit the words of the Commitment.

I believe the full greatness of our city, our region and our nation will only be achieved when every individual has a full and unrestricted opportunity to learn, grow and contribute to the community with all the potential of their innate personal gifts.

I believe that in this new millennium we can and we must move forward to remove the vestiges of racism and other forms of discrimination from our city, our country and our individual lives.

In this spirit, I make this commitment:

I commit to use my individual strength to eliminate discriminatory behaviors, policies and practices from my community.

I commit to openly and intentionally seek to open doors that will ensure everyone the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

I commit to embrace diversity and seek equity for all members of the human family.

This is a set of principles that we believe our community can embrace and prosper with.

Our goals are that

1. The Commitment will be signed by half a million residents of this region over the next five years.
2. The Commitment will be incorporated in the curriculum of every school system within the region in that timeframe.
3. Organizations that share the objective of letting justice and freedom ring throughout the Ohio River Valley join us as partners and allies in making the Commitment a set of principles we live by.
4. The spirit of the Commitment will be translated into actions that will steadily shrink to insignificance the large disparities we now have in home ownership, housing quality, educational quality, health care access, employment, corporate leadership and incarceration rates in our community.
5. And finally, that the spirit of the Commitment will live in each of us and guide the way we live our lives and engage with each other.

These goals may sound ambitious, but they are not unrealistic. We are a community that's rising. There is no greater evidence of this than the Cincinnati Police Department's evolution since 2001 to become a world-class model for effective policing and police-community relations. Let's accelerate the rise by adopting the Greater Cincinnati Commitment.

Ten years ago, the residents of another city decided to embrace this kind of vision. That city is Birmingham, Alabama. Many of us are familiar with Birmingham's history. I lived it. I grew up there. The people of

Birmingham did it with the Birmingham Pledge, a simple and elegant statement of human rights. The Birmingham Pledge was the inspiration for the Greater Cincinnati Commitment. It was created in 1998 and has made a real difference in the Birmingham community. We have already learned a great deal from the Birmingham Pledge Foundation, the organization that oversees the work of the Pledge, and we expect that to continue.

We have formed a sort of “sister city” relationship with the Birmingham Pledge Foundation. Some of us traveled there for the 10th anniversary of the Pledge in September. Now, five of them are here with us in Cincinnati to support the rollout of the Greater Cincinnati Commitment. Let me introduce the members of the visiting delegation.

- Jim Rotch is the creator of the Birmingham Pledge and Chair of the Birmingham Pledge Foundation
- Wade Black is Executive Director of the Birmingham Pledge Foundation
- Louis Willie III is an attorney in private practice in Birmingham and a member of the board of the Pledge Foundation
- Rev. Carolyn McKinstry is a minister who led the \$3.8MM restoration of the historic 16th Street Baptist Church and a member of the board of the Birmingham Pledge Foundation
- Gary Burley is CEO of Pro Start Academy, which prepares youth for potential careers in sports. He is a retired National Football League player and has roots in Cincinnati as a defensive end for eight years with the Bengals. In fact, I understand he has a Superbowl ring he earned as a Cincinnati Bengal. Now if that doesn't make you nostalgic, you're definitely not a football fan.

Now I'll turn the mike over to Jim Rotch. Jim will briefly summarize the Birmingham Pledge story for you. After Jim finishes, we'll give you the opportunity to ask some questions, then I'll close things out with you.