

Indiana State NAACP Conference – Education Summit – Saturday, August 13, 2011
“You’ve Got to be Carefully Taught” - Susan Sandberg, Bloomington City Council President

Thank you, and welcome on behalf of the Honorable Mayor, Mark Kruzan and the City of Bloomington. I’m pleased to be here this morning as you begin the Education Summit of the Indiana State NAACP Conference at Ivy Tech Community College. “Education, No One Left Out, and No Stumbling Blocks” - an inspiring and timely theme for this conference.

I come from a long line of teachers and a family where education was a family value. I departed from the family career path ever so slightly, but I do teach, I am a lifelong learner, and there are few issues as important today as our careful attention to the status of education and our public schools.

I follow the work of Marian Wright Edelman and the Children’s Defense Fund. It is a statement by Marian Wright Edelman that largely inspired me to run for public office. She said, “You cannot be what you cannot see.” Simply put, we need role models. We need to see people doing the jobs that appeal to us as unique and capable human beings. We need role models who are teachers, leaders, workers, innovators. If we do not see ourselves reflected in these role models, we are less likely to aspire to those careers. Of course, I refer to gender equality when I encourage my fellow females to “go vote, go run, go lead, go girl” – a motto of the White House Project. In doing public sector outreach with women I refer to the fact that in 2011 83% of Congress is male, and only 17% serve to remind women that yes, we can achieve success in elected office. We can lead, influence public opinion, and legislate good public policy. It’s hard to be what we cannot see. We need visible mentors.

On your conference agenda today, I’m pleased to see a presentation from Terre Haute North Vigo High School about their HERO (Helping Everyone Respect Others) Anti-Bullying Program. Isn’t it tragic...that in our educational culture students are not yet free to be who they are without threat of physical harm, or derision, or exclusion...as if they didn’t matter? I am encouraged by the national anti-bullying campaign called, “It Gets Better” reminding our targeted and most fragile young people that good years lie ahead. It is a brilliant campaign led by respected role models telling their stories and inspiring our youth to hang in there, because it does get better. Life is worth living. Students can find happiness and achieve success in all their beautiful differences.

The basic premises of civil rights and civility must be taught in our schools and embraced by all educators in our systems. If we as the administrators, the teachers, the adults in the educational system don’t teach equality, how do we expect our children to learn the value of respect, of diversity, of a United States of America made stronger by our differences?

Early in my social work career, I valued the words of Jesse Jackson when he urged us to prioritize our focus and public funding on the front end in order to decrease the huge social costs on the back end. That made sense to me way back when, and it makes sense to me today. Cuts in school funding cause our class sizes to grow and student learning opportunities to shrink. Concurrently, we face epidemic overcrowding in our jails and prisons. It is said that we can predict how many new beds we’ll need in our prisons by the identified number of so-called “at-risk” children in our Second Grades. If we know this, why don’t we spend every resource at our disposal to prevent our children from ever being identified...”at-risk”? Why is it that many Americans are so

reluctant to invest public resources on the front end? We all know the high costs of incarceration, not only costing tax dollars but costing human potential and lost productivity. Reduced school funding that leads to larger class sizes and loss of opportunity on the front end....seems like bad public policy to me.

I teach an arts and humanities class in the Monroe County jail with inmates in the Addicts in Recovery program. Using music, theater, poetry, films, books, and the visual arts, I teach a variety of lessons in getting along. In just getting by. In making the best of our circumstances. In reaching for sobriety, and in understanding our differences. In a racially diverse cell block of men in very close quarters, it is important to openly discuss the realities of prejudice. These men are receptive to new ideas, and they speak with authority about prejudice. This afternoon, my lesson plan will include lyrics from the Broadway musical, South Pacific. You may be familiar with the biting irony of this song, **You've Got to Be Carefully Taught:**

*"You've got to be taught
To hate and fear
You've got to be taught
From year to year
It's got to be drummed
In your dear little ear
You've got to be carefully taught.
You've got to be taught to be afraid
Of people whose eyes are oddly made
And people whose skin is a different shade
You've got to be carefully taught.
You've got to be taught before it's too late,
Before you are six or seven or eight,
To hate all the people your relatives hate,
You've got to be carefully taught."*

Sadly, in America, prejudice is still taught, but.....prejudice can be unlearned. Learning takes place in a variety of interesting settings – in our prisons, in our homes and families, in our churches, mosques and synagogues, in elder-care facilities, child care centers, and obviously in our public and private schools. Lifelong learning takes place in simple ways like reading a book, watching a movie, or listening to the lyrics of a song. It is our highest responsibility to teach our children well and to encourage lifelong learning.

This conference brings you together in fellowship and in all good faith that there are solutions to our educational challenges. I commend you for your bold leadership in exploring them....and wish you the best outcomes as you move forward from this Education Summit.

Thank you, and welcome to Bloomington!