

National Day of Racial Healing

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Remarks

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We are so grateful to be able to pause, a day after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day to celebrate his legacy and engage in a National Day of Racial Healing focused on a theme so dear to all of us – “Lifting Our Voices Through Education.” This theme underlies so clearly the work, day in and day out of our Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation Center, led by our fearless director Sharon Stroye with so many Newark partners, from the Newark Public Library and the NJISJ, to the students in Newark Public Schools, to our own NJSTEP, HLLC and LSAMP students, and faculty and staff across our community. And speaking of that deep and broad commitment to racial justice, we are here today following the courageous and steadfast leadership of Senators Booker and Menendez, Representative Payne and Mayor Baraka, who each work every day to right the landscape of opportunity in our community and nation.

We also are grateful to all of you out there who are joining us for Rutgers-Newark’s annual day of racial healing. As we all witness the destructive events of the last year, from brutal police killings to the white supremacist mob taking over the Capital, it is once again clear that our nation desperately needs both racial healing and reparative action.

At this moment of peril in our nation’s democracy there is probably nothing more critical that we as hopeful educators and students, artists and businesses, faith leaders, and citizens can confront than using the tools of truth-telling, healing, and transformative work to address a racial reckoning so long-overdue, as William Darity and Kirsten Mullen call out in their recent volume, *From Here to Equality*, on the need for modern reparations for the “intergenerational effects of white supremacy.”

As they detail, we have started this process many times in history, from reconstruction to the civil rights struggle, and yet each substantive period of progress – real as they were and reflecting such hard work by so many courageous citizens and leaders – has been followed by despairing retreats, from reconstruction to Jim Crow; from the civil rights victories of the 1960s to four decades of so-called “color blind policies” that were anything but colorblind and have left us with systemic racism eating away at the very well-being and security and freedom of communities of color.

We need only look around us in our great city and follow the historical route from the bravery of the Newark rebellion through over fifty years of perseverance and hard work by the faith community, the Newark Community Development Network, and citizens and artists and progressive alliances alike, to today’s moment of both shame and hope. Shame, as we confront this harsh reality, and hope, as we see a movement for reparations taking hold, right here in NJ, where the median net worth of white families is \$309,000, while that for Black and Latinx

families is just \$5,900 and \$7,020, respectively, as Ryan Haygood and his colleagues at the NJISJ rightfully call out.

At times like this, it can be difficult to see reason to hope. But as my dear colleague Jacquie Mattis, Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences recently wrote, “Hopeful people do not wish—they imagine and act. They believe in their agency—that is, their capacity to achieve the outcomes.”

And when we think about how to spread hope and agency together, it feels so fitting that in this moment of reckoning, the focus for this year’s national day of racial healing is on “Lifting Our Voices Through Education.” For education is precisely about cultivating that hope and agency by lifting our voices and it revolves around three pillars we so embrace. *Truth-telling*, as for example, when our public scholars work with local citizens to set out the historical record of oppression, and document its current footprint. *Racial healing*, as perhaps most impactfully represented by the joining of voices in the arts, from the narratives of filmmakers to documenting anti-racist organizing to the murals of New Arts Justice to the Healing Sounds of Newark.

But it doesn’t stop there, does it? No, most critical to our work is the efforts to turn truth-telling and healing into much needed transformation, collaborations all across our many partners that aim to produce social mobility and equitable growth in our communities.

And, showing our agency through action is what we must do, and we all are on the Mayor’s page on that front – from the cross-sector collaboration in the Newark 2020 initiative to his Equitable Growth Commission and the investment in local Black and Latinx businesses in the Forty Acres and a Mule Fund to his new Office of Violence Prevention to the Newark City of Leaning Collaborative and steadfast support for the Arts as the beacon of social justice. We have a leader and we are following, together, here in Newark. We also have our national representatives spearheading legislation for a National Commission on Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation to complement the legislation in Congress for a Commission on Reparations (HR 40/S. 1083) and more recently the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, as well as support from our Essex Delegation to the New Jersey state legislature for a range of progressive policies from remediation on environmental toxins in frontline communities like ours to addressing the digital divide and creating inclusive justice for NJ Dreamers and the long-awaited right to vote for formerly incarcerated members of our community.

So, as we enter today’s conversations about how to approach racial healing together, we can’t be afraid—we must not be afraid—to face the truth about our nation, about our communities, about ourselves, as painful as that may be. But we have to also understand that the hope for moving forward is right here. It is us, together.

Let’s do that here today, lifting our voices, lifting up education as an essential road to truth, racial healing, and transformation.

Thank you for being with us!