

FINAL
Inaugural address

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A Change is Gonna Come

Good evening.

David, thank you for that gracious introduction. And thank you, Tina, for that rendition of “A Change Is Gonna Come.” Man o’ man, what a song! She brought that, didn’t she?

To the distinguished guests, colleagues, mentors, friends and family gathered here tonight — welcome.

To the physician leaders seated behind me, thank you for your commitment to this profession we are privileged to call our own.

Tonight is special for me. But inaugurations are never just about one person.

They are moments that remind us how far we have come. How much we’ve sacrificed. And the courage required for what comes next.

This moment may bear my name, but it was built by many hands and made possible by the people I love and appreciate...some who are in this room tonight.

My daughter, Amina, you are named after the great African warrior queen. And Kathryn, your middle name, is from my mother who was the essence of strength. In these names, you carry victory in your soul.

Through merger and acquisition with my wife Kadi, I gained two wonderful daughters, Sophia and Yasmeen, along with Yasmeen’s amazing husband, Marcus.

Sophia, whose soul and spirit come through in her beautiful art. Yasmeen, whose strength and wisdom come from before antiquity. Marcus, your partnership with Yasmeen is what every man hopes for his daughter.

I’m blessed to be part of your lives and I can’t wait to see what the future holds for each of you.

I have several in-laws here tonight: brothers and sisters-in-law, nieces and nephews-in-law, and my wonderful mother-in-law, Ina, who connects me to my home and the birth of civilization – Alkebulan. I love and appreciate you. I only wish my mother could have

met you because you would have been the best of friends.

I am also joined by my loving and supportive older siblings Bernard, Yvette, and Major – each accomplished, successful, and making an impact in their industry and community.

You have always been my heroes.

My nieces, nephews, cousins and friends from every aspect of my life, including my childhood friend and brother Nathaniel, his wife, Latonya, and my godson, Naeem.

Thank you.

I'm thankful for the Morehouse men here tonight. And those who are not. Men who understand that true greatness means being steadfast, honest and true in all things. Thank you, President F. DuBois Bowman for being here.

To my fraternity brothers, the men of Kappa Alpha Psi, Pi Chapter, thank you for living the example of "Achievement in every field of human endeavor."

I wouldn't be here without the efforts of my campaign team, as well as those who sponsored me, those who endorsed me, and every champion who rallied on the ground, behind the scenes, and every place in between. I am forever grateful.

To my village, and if you are going to go anywhere in life, you need one:

Dr. Thomas J. Blocker

Dr. JK Haynes

Dr. Gregory Threatte

Dr. Louis Brown

Dr. Peter Deckers

Dr. Art Tarantino

Dr. Kunle Odunsi

Dr. Wesley Hicks

Each of these men, in their own way, made me the physician I am today.

And to my attorneys from Wigdor Law: Michael Willimen and Jeanne Christensen, thank you for your relentless advocacy for what is right and what is just.

This village has played a significant role in building the man standing before you. They have helped me understand that leadership is not what we achieve alone but what we build together.

To my beautiful wife, Kadi – thank you.

Thank you for your partnership. Your vision. And your enduring support. You have stood beside me during moments of clarity and uncertainty. Sweetheart, thank you for bringing joy to my heart. I love you more than words could ever express. You make me a better man!

Tonight, if I can be very real with you, when I think about the House of Medicine, I think about my own home. Not long ago, I purchased a 120-year-old home in Buffalo. Over the last few years, the house has revealed the decisions made by generations of previous owners – some which leave me scratching my head.

Why would you ever paint over original mahogany hardwood floors? I think about the beauty buried beneath the paint and the character that was lost. It really irks me.

But here's what I've learned:

When you buy an old house, you inherit everything that comes with it.

Its beauty.

Its craftsmanship.

Its history.

But also, its cracks.

Its weaknesses.

The hidden issues behind the walls.

Whether you created those problems or not, once the house belongs to you; **you own it.**

That is true for the House of Medicine - and our country.

Tonight, as the 181st president of the AMA, I am a steward of its past, its present and its

future. I stand here fully aware of both the extraordinary strengths of this institution and the painful parts of its history.

Without question, the AMA has shaped modern medicine in countless ways. The AMA has given voice to the needs of physicians and patients and helped define the standards that influence medical care today.

But that influence carries enormous responsibility — not only to lead our profession but help determine its future. That means recognizing progress - but also confronting the parts of our history that fell short of our values.

Part of that past is the exclusion of qualified Black physicians and other minorities from membership in this organization — before the Civil War, and a century afterward. We cannot build the future of medicine honestly without acknowledging that history directly.

Just like an old home, when the foundation is damaged, we do not walk away from it — we come together to repair it.

We lead with honesty about the past. We walk with courage in the present. We work to rebuild a profession that is stronger, more just, and more resilient for those who will follow us.

You see the men and women sitting behind me? Each of these leaders – these trailblazers – have shown us what can and must be done.

Among them are:

Nancy Dickey

Robert Wah

Patrice Harris

Jesse Ehrenfeld

Bobby Mukkamala

They represent historic firsts for the AMA, across race, orientation, and gender – but they are more than milestones. Their leadership represents the promise of our country and the responsibility of this profession.

Because diversity of people, and ideas, and culture is more than a moment in time - it is a message for the future.

Leadership is everywhere.

Leadership is ALL of us.

From major hospital systems and independent practices.

From small communities often overlooked.

And sometimes...from a stuttering child growing up in Gary, Indiana.

Yes, you heard correct.

I stuttered.

As I think about that, it takes me back.

For multiple reasons – some rooted in circumstance, others in assumption – the education system undervalued me. I was told I was not suited for college, and teachers said I would be in jail by the time I was 19.

My best friend of nearly 50 years, Nathaniel Turner, who is on the stage this evening, was one of the few people that I could share my dreams with. He helped me to see a future that the world did not see.

Or chose not to.

Today, that same voice that once stuttered and was overlooked and undervalued, now speaks as an advocate for patients and physicians around the world.

He now speaks as president of the American Medical Association!

Tonight, I am thinking about the matriarchs who had a vision for my life.

My mother, the late Kathryn Betts

My grandmother, the late Mattie Upshaw

My two aunts, the late Joyce Johnson – AND my Aunt Jo Ann Betts who is here tonight.

One day, they called me into a room. At 10 years old, when four women call you into a room, and one of them is your mother, you are in **trouble**.

My cousin went in first. He came out looking stunned. Then they called me in. My aunt looked me directly in the eye and said:

“Willie, we need a doctor and a lawyer in the family. Your cousin is going to be the lawyer. What does that make you?”

Not, “Would you like to become a doctor?”

Not, “Have you considered medicine?”

No.

“Your options are doctor or lawyer, and one is already taken.”

“We need you to be a doctor.”

And yes, my cousin did become a lawyer. Apparently, neither of us had a say in the matter.

But as I grew older, I realized something profound about that moment.

They were not simply choosing a career for me.
They were responding to what they saw around us.

Four women sitting in a room decided that society needed something better.

They understood, what I had not learned yet – that our family needed an advocate in the health care system. Not only for us. But for our community.

For people whose voices too often went unheard. For people navigating a system that did not always see them, or value them, or serve them equally.

It was my grandfather who showed me what kind of physician I should become.

My grandfather was a World War II veteran who ran a small business on the West Side of Chicago. Not far from where I stand tonight. When I visited him as a child, I saw things that I did not fully understand.

Neighborhoods where people couldn't get the care they needed.
Communities where opportunities were scarce.
Families who were forced to make impossible choices between food, medicine and rent.

I saw inequity not as an academic concept but as everyday life.

And honestly, it made me uncomfortable. But I learned that discomfort is sometimes the subconscious trying to wake us up ...

and open our eyes to the reality around us.

When my grandfather talked about my future as a doctor, he didn't talk about prestige.

He never talked about titles.
Or money.
Not once.

He talked about responsibility.

He said, "Be a physician for the least of these."

Not only for people who look like you. But for those who need you most.

And then he told me something I have never forgotten.

He said, "If you are not willing to be that kind of doctor, we don't need you to be a doctor at all."

I carried those lessons to Morehouse, along with the Bible my grandmother gave me. Of all the books I studied at Morehouse, that was the first — in fact it's the very same Bible I placed my hand on when I took the oath of office moments ago.

At Morehouse, I learned to burn the midnight oil and be the candle in the dark.

I learned that excellence is intentional ...

that leadership without humanity is empty ...

that my obligation is not merely to succeed, but to leave something stronger behind.

The path that led me to the AMA.

I'll admit, I was hesitant. Well, I was adamant about **not** joining the AMA. I struggled with the organization's history.

I wondered if there was a place for me. And people like me.

But then, I attended my first Interim Meeting in 1996 — just a year after Dr. Lonnie Bristow became the AMA's first Black president.

The meeting surprised me. Everywhere I looked, I saw physicians who had taken time away from their patients to advocate on their behalf. I heard debates and meaningful discussions about policy, science and research. I felt the energy in the room and was awed by the respect that colleagues – from so many different points of view – showed one another.

This was not the view of the AMA that I had.

And in that moment, I began to understand that medicine is not only what we do, but what we become when we stand together in service of something larger than ourselves.

I realized that the AMA was not simply a building, or a title, or an organization defined only by its past. It was a house — still standing, still under renovation.

A house with extraordinary craftsmanship in some places... and deep cracks in others.

A house that had opened doors for many, while closing them to others for far too long.

But I also realized something else.

Houses do not become stronger because people stand outside pointing at the damage. A house is strengthened when courageous people step inside, tell the truth about what needs repair, and commit themselves to rebuilding – brick by brick.

Today, the work of building a system that works for everyone remains urgent. Because the cracks in our health system are no longer small fractures hidden behind the walls — they are structural failures affecting lives every single day.

Families are struggling to access basic care. Communities are losing physicians faster than they can replace them. Patients are delaying treatment until illness becomes a crisis simply because they cannot afford it. And far too many physicians are burned out by a system that demands more while giving us less.

This is NOT sustainable.

And deep down, America knows it.

When outcomes are determined more by ZIP code than diagnosis, the system is failing its promise.

That is why conversations about health equity matter.

It's not about **that** family.

It's about **our family**.

And our family is the **American family**.

And yet today, there is growing pressure to avoid difficult conversations about gaps in care, unequal outcomes, and the barriers too many patients face.

But ignoring cracks in the foundation does not make the house stronger. It makes collapse inevitable.

This moment calls for courage.

To remember the oath we took.

And the purpose we serve.

And the lives we are called to change.

Medicine has always been about **people**.

And our ability, not simply to do right, but to do good.

We must understand that we are the AmeriCAN Medical Association.

Not the AmeriCAN'T Medical Association.

We can solve what's broken.

We can build what's missing.

We can create what's next.

These are not abstract ideas based on theory.

These are lived realities that I understand as a physician and as a patient. I am a proud prostate cancer survivor, fourteen years and counting. Thank you, Dr. Jean Joseph.

I know what it means to hear life-altering news.

I know the fear that comes with not knowing if a treatment will work.

I know what it means to place your trust in a physician during the most vulnerable moments of your life — and pray their hands, and God, will heal you.

I'm not telling you what I've read. I'm telling you what I've lived.

I remember the days immediately after my diagnosis, lifting my young daughter from her crib and holding her just a little longer, wondering whether I would live long enough to watch her grow up.

As a urologist, I knew the statistics. I knew Black men faced higher risk, later diagnosis, and worse outcomes.

But serious illness has a way of changing how you look at obstacles, and how you search for answers in midst of a storm. Every day that you're able to live through it is day of grace and a chance to do something better, even remarkable, with the life you have been given.

At every stage, I am driven by the lessons my grandfather taught me and the vision my mother, aunts and grandmother had for me. They told me that life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness – and justice for all – does indeed, include **all of us**.

Period. Without exception.

Tonight, I'm thinking of my mother's struggle during childbirth to bring me into this world. Her doctors told her there was a significant chance she might die during childbirth.

I'm thinking of the times that she had more month than money.

I'm thinking about the prostate cancer that tried to derail me.

I'm thinking about the barriers, backlash, and hostility I faced as an employed physician – but overcame with the help of fierce advocates and scrappy friends.

Despite these setbacks, frustrations and CANCER, I am still standing.

I am still fighting.
I am not done.
I'm just getting started.

Don't let **anyone** tell you that your destiny is out of reach.

Don't let others' negative perceptions or life's challenges derail you.

What's inside of you is greater than any obstacles in front of you.

Years ago, I met Dr. Lonnie Bristow at an inauguration gala. We shared our mutual respect for Frank Staggers, urologist and past president of the California Medical Association. We talked about Bristow's historic rise as the first Black president of the AMA and the first AMA president elected from a specialty, the American College of Physicians.

I thanked him for his time and leadership and walked off. But he called me back. He pulled me to him and he whispered, "I was keeping that seat warm for you."

So now let me say this to every young physician, every resident, every medical student, and every child watching tonight and wondering whether there is a place for them in medicine and in the AMA.

I'm keeping this seat warm for you.

Let us use our voices not to echo what has always been, but to build what must come next.

A system that doesn't just work for SOME of us. But a system that works for the SUM of us.

A health care system with dignity.
A system that leaves no one behind.
The world is waiting for us to rise up, to stand up, and to speak out.

We can!
We must!
And we will!

Thank you.

Now, let's go make history.

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