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Lacey: Remembering Councill School
REMEMBERING COUNCILL SCHOOL
Henry C. Lacey, Ph.D.
Class of 1961

Ladies and Gentlemen, I am indeed flattered and humbled on being asked to speak before this group.

First, I am flattered to think that the members of the alumni association thought enough of me to ask me to come before you on such a momentous occasion, a sacred occasion. I consider it sacred because it gives us pause to consider the importance of this institution, the William Hooper Councill School, in our lives; to rededicate ourselves to the principles for which it stood; and to commit ourselves to guaranteeing continuity of those principles. It is truly exhilarating to stand here as the keynoter at this commemoration. Thirty-three years have passed since my graduation from Councill High School, and I am having some real difficulty in realizing that and in accepting the idea that you asked me, of all the grads you could have asked, to speak today. I feel a genuine humility when I think of the many great sons and daughters of Councill who have achieved great things, particularly those who served the institution itself with consummate commitment and professionalism through the years. I see some of you today.

Just trying to prepare for this occasion has been overwhelming. The names and faces that came back to me were those of people many of you recall, people who meant as much to you and your personal development as they meant to me and mine, and I find myself wondering what would Mr. Fields say about my being here today. Mr. Comer, Mrs. Swoopes, Mrs. Fearn, Coach Davis, Miss Allen? As I thought about these and others, I hoped that they would be pleased in that they (and many others) are, in large part, for better or worse, responsible for whatever accomplishments I have made. For the vital roles they played in my life, I am deeply thankful.

I am even more thankful to be able to look upon the faces of other heroes and heroines, my former teachers, who are with us today. They know who they are. I'll say more about a few of them momentarily. But let me say here also that I'm most happy that the most important teacher in my life is here with us. I speak, of course, of my mother, Mrs. Marguerite Dobbins Lacey, who also was a teacher at Councill in the elementary division--thank God a few years after I got out of that division. On a final note of greetings, I am also delighted to see a number of relatives and special friends and classmates.

Memories! The memories that flood my mind today are overwhelming. I hope you will bear with me as I reminisce. You know, when one has made the same trek every school day of his formative years, it is bound to leave fairly strong impressions. For 12 years of my life, 9 months out of the year, I walked from

307 Lowe Street to Pelham Street, to Councill School. I recall it as if it were yesterday, walking down Lowe Street, being joined by my neighborhood pals, Pap Rice, the Davis boys, Earl Pope, rounding the corner at Tuminello's, crossing the bridge, reaching the corner of Pump and Pelham (at Dennis's store) and being joined there by all the guys and girls from the Courts and far east side of town. Not only do I recall vividly the daily walks and our convergence at this holy place; I also remember many late night walks, following our return from away football games. Sometimes those brief walks were exhilarating, as when we had vanquished a conference rival for the conference championship. On other occasions, this brief three-block walk could seem like miles, as on those occasions when we had returned from Chattanooga and Howard High School. (I'll say more on this later.)

It is simply impossible to explain to people just what 12 years of attendance at one school can do to and for a person. My children went to four different preparatory schools. There is simply no way that they can understand the sense of community, the sense of family engendered by our experiences at Councill. This school was truly an extension of my home. My teachers were additional parents. They cared, and they proved themselves role models in every way. My fellow students were my brothers and sisters. There was truly something special about the William Hooper Councill High School. And this was reflected in the great school spirit we shared. "School Spirit." This is a phrase one hardly hears these days. It's considered outmoded, corny, I guess, but we had an abundance of it. Why did we feel this way?

Much of the reason is, of course, as I noted earlier, in the quality of the teachers we had. I know the danger of naming particular individuals, but on an occasion such as this, I simply don't know any other way. Please bear with me as I recall every one of them, beginning with the first grade: Mrs. Fannie Lowe, Mrs. Virginia Moore, Mrs. Ethel Richards, Mrs. Ella Kendricks, Miss Rosa Allen, Miss Marie True, Mr. Charles Brandon, Mr. Isaac Rooks, Mrs. Frances Swoopes, Mr. Henry Comer, Mrs. Dorothy Turner, Mrs. Susie Gandy, Mr. Jerry Davis, Mr. Willie Clark, Miss Ernestine Street, Mrs. Theresa DeShields, Mrs. Roper, Mrs. Thompson, and, of course, Mr. Kellam and Mr. Hill, our coach and our band director. Each of these persons contributed mightily to my academic and personal growth and to the full development of all the young people under their tutelage.

If I had time, I could tell you stories about each one of them, stories which would define them as individuals and teachers. They were all totally committed and conscientious in their daily preparations and high expectations of us, and, "Separate but Equal" notwithstanding, they taught us to think ourselves as good as anybody, intellectually and otherwise. Respect was given, and respect was expected in return. We had teachers who were as concerned with teaching us lessons in proper living as they were in teaching their subject

matter. The importance of this comes home to me so dramatically today as I hear the stories of my wife, an itinerant art teacher in New Orleans, who comes home every day with some horror story of what a second, third, fourth, or eleventh grader did or said. The sad thing is that these things are said and done in the presence of teachers, counselors and principals, who do nothing to curb the undesirable behavior. Perhaps their recalcitrance is born of fear. Perhaps it is an index of their having simply given up. Whatever, it is a tragic commentary, and there is little wonder that we have the problems that we do today. Men and women of character, our teachers, insisted that we develop into the same.

It was a part of the natural order for me to see in church on Sunday the same individuals who taught me Monday through Friday, and I might add that they were not simply there. They were totally involved, taking leadership roles in the church and in other significant community groups. Hence, they imbued us also with a sense of the importance of service, the idea that were duty-bound to give something back. All of this served to give us a tremendous sense of communal bonds, all connected through the nucleus of the school.

About the teaching ability of these individuals--they were master teachers, knowledgeable, rigorous, and creative. I was fortunate enough to learn the importance of developing my expressive abilities at the feet of such greats as Mrs. Turner who insisted that we not only hone our writing skills but our speaking skills as well. She insisted that we read widely (and had no problems with my reading books such as Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* in the 1950s--do you realize how revolutionary that was?). She also undoubtedly was one of the motivating forces in instituting the senior year speech requirement, mandated of all graduating seniors. For all these things, I am immensely thankful.

I mentioned the creativity of the teachers we knew at Councill. This was, of course, a must under "Separate but Equal." As we all know, there was never any equality under that system. Thinking back on these early days, I can recall the time prior to the construction of the "new" building, i.e. a time before we had a gymnasium, science laboratories, a cafeteria. I guess I had almost blocked out such memories, but in trying to reach back as far as I could, I retrieved memories of varsity basketball games played outside, on red clay. By the time I reached junior high school, with the completion of the "new" building, facilities were better. Still a far cry from those at the city's other two high schools. Nevertheless, what we lacked in equipment and facilities was more than offset by the aforementioned creativity and commitment of our teachers. I am sure that there has never been a more creative teacher of high school science courses than Henry Comer. Mr. Comer could excite anybody, even our most committed class clowns and bad actors, about the wonders of science. It is nothing short of miraculous that my small graduating class of 50 or so students produced three medical doctors. It is because we had such

persons as Mr. Comer, who didn't give his students time to think they were deprived, underprivileged, and ill-equipped.

When I think of Councill, I think also of how we were urged to become Renaissance men and women. Well before the Army took up the theme of "Be all that you can be," we were given that mandate in so many ways. We were taught to value scholastic achievement, outstanding artistic performance, and surpassing athletic accomplishment. Because of the relative smallness of our school, it was, indeed, essential to have a bunch of multi-talented individuals. There was never any conflict in one's trying to be an "A" student, a good musician (choir or band), and a good football, baseball, or basketball player. Amazingly, some people did it all. We were fortunate in having models who showed us that this was possible. I speak of a person such as Isaac Rooks, masterful teacher of the social sciences, a jazz saxophonist, singer, and track coach. He was John Hope Franklin, Charlie Parker, Billy Eckstein, and Jesse Owens rolled into one (and we all wished we could make our collars roll in that great Mr. "B" style, just like his).

As I stated, we were taught to appreciate excellence no matter the form. Whether we were singing *The Hallelujah Chorus* under the baton of Mrs. Gandy or playing a 12-bar blues such as *The Hucklebuck* (we didn't realize the more sophisticated title was *Now's the Time*) with Mr. Hill or Mr. Rooks, it had to be done well, with style and grace. The same for the many spirituals done by the choirs (both the junior and senior choir). As I look back, I realize the role played by our musical groups in helping us to develop a healthy respect for the beauty of African American culture as well as music from the European or so-called classical tradition. We were made to understand that we were heirs to it all, that it was all ours and, moreover, that it all had merit. Hence, Mr. Hill encouraged us as we formed a band, playing rhythm and blues and later jazz. He taught us to play the works of Mendelsohn, Mozart, and Wagner during the day and drove us to R & B gigs at night. For all this, I am thankful. Such experiences were invaluable in thoroughly humanizing me and my peers.

Likewise with athletics, and I think I can claim some real authority and privilege here. After all, Coach Kellam has said that I played for him longer than any of his players. It's true, but there is a catch to it. You see, I only played three years as a true varsity player--grades 10, 11 and 12. However, some of you oldtimers might remember me as team mascot from first grade through about fourth. Through the ingenuity of my big brother, George, I was recommended to Coach Kellam for that august responsibility and wore the number "0" my first year, the number "1/2" the next year, and from then on number "1." In about fourth grade, everybody agreed I was getting pretty big for the job, in fact bigger than some of the varsity players. So, I retired until, as I said 10th grade. I was one of Coach Kellam's "birds" for a long time, and I learned some great lessons over those seven years. I learned about hard work,

sacrifice, thorough preparation, teamwork, and perhaps most important of all, the value of setting high goals. Well before I read Robert Browning or heard of Benjamin Mays, Coach Kellam was indoctrinating us with their message. Browning's "Ah but a man's reach should exceed his grasp or what's a heaven for?" and Mays's "Not failure but low aim is sin." In scheduling people such as Howard High School, Parker High, and Cobb Avenue High, he passed on to us an understanding of these words. I must admit that as I, at 180 pounds, lined up across from a 300-pound Howard High School tackle, I often wished that Coach had had us aim a bit lower. Nevertheless, we always played them well, finally losing out to their size and depth. But as I said, great lessons were learned here. Those larger schools left those contests with a healthy respect for us and we left knowing that we could compete with anyone, and that those old locker room clichés had some validity. ("When the going gets tough, the tough get going." "It's not the size of the dog in the fight, it's the size of the fight in the dog." "A winner never quits and a quitter never wins.")

At various points in my life, I've faced some long odds, some trying times. I know that whatever character, whatever grace I've shown in those times is in no small measure a reflection of the lessons learned from Coach Kellam and, yes, Coach Davis.

I could, of course, go on and on about various individuals at Councill, and indeed, the larger Huntsville community who were positive influences on me. I could speak of the importance of Alabama A & M University and Oakwood College on developing young black minds, just how lucky we were to have these two institutions in our community because they too, like Councill, played key roles in bolstering our sense of self-worth and group pride. I can recall, vividly, being pulled along by my mother, as an elementary school boy, to see and hear such persons as Mordecai Johnson, Adam Clayton Powell, Mary McCleod Bethune, Marian Anderson, Duke Ellington. (I'm speaking of Huntsville, Alabama, in the early 1950's, and people have the nerve to call me culturally deprived!) Speaking as Vice President for Academic Affairs at another HBCU, I am most pleased to see these two institutions thriving today and continuing to serve as beacons of hope for the African American community, especially for African American youth. This group is at great peril today, ironically at greater peril than even that faced by my generation in the dark days of "Separate but Equal." They are battling forces much more lethal than mere segregation and its attendant evils. These young people are facing crises of value orientation and confidence. These are our children and grandchildren. My only prayer is that we have been able to pass on to them some vestiges, some remnants, of the world view we received at Councill.

In speaking of his upbringing, roughly around the time about which I have spoken, Clifton Taulbert makes a moving comment in his book *Once Upon a Time When We Were Colored*.

"I began to think about my childhood and other values I'd learned as I grew up in an environment much like that experienced by thousands of other colored Americans. Even though segregation was a painful reality for us, there were some very good things that happened. Today, I enjoy the broader society in which I live and I would never want to return to forced segregation, but I also have a deeply-felt sense that important values were conveyed to me in my colored childhood, values we're in danger of losing in our integrated world. As a child, I was not only protected but also nourished, encouraged, taught, and loved by people who, with no land, little money and few other resources, displayed the strength of a love which knew no measure. I have come to believe that this love is the true value, the legitimate measure of a people's worth."

"It is very difficult to master the present and make a meaningful contribution to the future unless you understand the appreciate the past--the good with the bad. I believe that to forget out colored past is to forget ourselves, who we are and what we've come from."

In the words of J. Rosemond Johnson,

"Lest our feet stray from the places our God where we meet Thee,
Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world we forget Thee,
Shadowed beneath Thy hand.
May we forever stand.
True to our God.
True to our Native Land."

Long live the memory and spirit of the William Hooper Council High School!