Charter Day Ceremony
June 30, 2009
B.N. Duke Auditorium
Chancellor Charlie Nelms

Good Morning!

Too little has been said of the extraordinary courage it took for Dr. James E. Shepard and the other founders to engage in this act of defiance. June 30, 1909, was during the depths of the great evil that was the Jim Crow South. In that shameful time in American history, Shepard signaled disobedience and declared his hope and faith in a better tomorrow by founding a college for African-Americans.

In 1909, laws strictly controlled every aspect of the life of a black person; from designating the room in the hospital you could be born to the plot of ground where you’d take your final rest. And in no other realm of life was segregation more pernicious than in education. In 1903, a North Carolina statute determined that no child with “Negro blood in its veins, however remote the strain, shall attend a school for the white race, and no such child shall be considered a white child.”

Historians recount that, on average, every week from 1890 through 1917, two or three black men or women were sadistically tortured and killed in the American South. After 1917, the rate slowed but never stopped until we’ll into my lifetime. And the lynch mobs were equal opportunity killers – the only qualifying characteristic for their victims was the color of their skin. So, the rich and well-educated like Shepard and the cofounders were just as at risk as the poor and illiterate.

But of course, most black people were desperately poor and illiterate, even in Durham, the nation’s “Capital of the Black Middle Class.” You see there actually was a handful of black people who owned their own homes in Durham; but make no mistake, in 1910, 97 percent of African-Americans worked as domestic or farm laborers, just a step or two removed from slavery. It was a status quo the white racists preferred to keep.

We’re so grateful they weren’t paying attention as many of Durham’s fledgling middle class built their modest bungalows in the neighborhood surrounding this campus, called College View. They never came to visit! So they didn’t see the elegant homes of the few wealthy blacks residing in the heart of Hayti, a community buttressed by White Rock Baptist Church, St. Joseph’s African Methodist Episcopal Church, Lincoln Hospital, Hillside High School, the Sanford L. Warren Library and of course, this university.

It’s miraculous when you think about it – this island of prosperity in a sea of despair. Shepard and the other founders offered us a glimpse of what was possible – that there could be another way of life. Who knows to what extent the hope they engendered through this glorious example inspired the Civil Rights Movement that was to come.

Shepard and the founders were ahead of their time. They knew then what we all know now; that education was and is a key to equality. Today, we honor that stroke of genius enacted with the stroke of a pen.

Welcome!