Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
Memorial Program
January 24, 2012, 11 a.m.
Keynote Address
Charlie Nelms, Chancellor
North Carolina Central University

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly

Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow

I wish you all good morning!

I bring you greetings from North Carolina Central University, America’s oldest public, liberal arts institution for African-Americans where our highest priority is to create and sustain a culture of student success.

It is a culture characterized by high levels of learning, student retention and graduation.

I would like to express my appreciation to Director Delia Johnson for inviting me to speak today.

I began with the words of the poem *Hold Fast to Dreams* by Langston Hughes, my favorite poet.

These words should serve as a backdrop for the thoughts I wish to share about what was accomplished by Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement, and what was not.

Where I grew up, clean water and electricity were scarce, let alone indoor plumbing, or a roof that didn’t leak.

I was one of 11 children in a farming family in the Delta region of the great state of Arkansas.

My siblings and I walked three miles along dirt and gravel roads to crowd into a one-room schoolhouse.

It was a school established by the Julius Rosenwald Foundation in the 1950s.
My teacher Beatrice Johnson taught all children from pre-primer through to the sixth grade.

The white plantation owners would close the school whenever they needed us to plant, till, or harvest the cotton in the fields.

That meant we were in class for no more than four or five months each year.

It was the height of the Jim Crow era.

I drank from “Colored Only” fountains, used the “Colored Only” restrooms and sat in the “Colored” section at the back of the bus.

I went to the movie theater only twice in my youth.

I couldn’t handle the humiliation of having to sit in the balcony when there were plenty of empty seats on the ground floor.

The plantation owners fully expected me and my ten brothers and sisters to become field workers like all of the other blacks in our rural community.

That life was not far removed from the drudgery of generations of African slaves who had gone before us.

Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement changed much of that.

They forced the repeal of the Jim Crow laws so that those features of my youth and education were no longer true for the next generation of black children in the South.

That was a sea change for African-Americans — indeed a giant step forward for all Americans.

Nothing since has come close to that long jump.

Despite the election of an African-American president, despite nearly proportional representation in the House of Representatives, despite the appearance of more black faces on television, too much remains unchanged.

As we gather here today, instead of poll taxes, skill-testing questions or proof of property ownership to vote, we have new photo-ID requirements in 15 states and the list is still growing.

The South is well represented here.
Texas, Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, Tennessee, South Carolina and Florida require photo ID.

North Carolina would have joined them too, but Governor Bev Perdue vetoed the voter ID bill intended for us last June.

Photo ID serves as an impediment to the poor and elderly who may have no reason to have photo ID because they don’t drive.

According to the Brennan Center for Justice, a non-partisan public policy and law institute at New York University’s School of Law, 25 percent of African-Americans and 11 percent of all Americans have no photo-ID.

By the way, a student photo-ID doesn’t count in Texas or Wisconsin.

To acquire your free photo-ID, it’ll cost you time, effort — and money too, if you don’t have the necessary documentation, including a valid birth certificate.

Many politicians purport that Photo ID is necessary to end the problem of voter fraud.

But no state advocating for this requirement has been able to document any significant evidence of voter fraud.

So, if photo ID doesn’t really save us from voter fraud, what do you suppose cutting early voting or election-day voter registration save us from?

We worked hard in the 2008 election that saw the installation of the nation’s first black president.

We worked so hard that we were still resting when the election of 2010 came around and most of us sat it out.

The trouble is, as you well know, 2010 was a Census year.

State legislatures all over the country were faced with redrawing the voting districts to conform to the new demographic data.

While we were resting, Republicans took control of 20 formerly Democratic state legislatures, including my own.

And they’re redrawing the maps their way.

Fortunately, 16 states including my home state of North Carolina, must submit their redistricting plans to the U.S. Department of Justice to be pre-cleared.
Why?

Because of Martin Luther King and Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and because these states can’t be trusted to serve the interests of all of their citizens **equally** — even now — even more than four decades after the Act was passed.

This is why the current debate about state rights is so frightening to minorities across this country, the states have proven time and again — today as surely as yesterday — that they cannot be trusted to fully protect our civil rights.

Kansas, for example, has a homogeneous population of less than three million people of whom 84 percent are white.

Kansas can achieve majority votes on any number of issues that curtail the rights of minorities and women too.

Indeed, Kansas has instituted strict photo ID requirements for voting and made the provision of legal abortions nearly impossible.

What does this mean?

We have a developing patchwork quilt of states where the fundamental rules concerning elections, life and liberty differ depending on where you happen to reside.

We know from experience that many states have never done what was right for blacks and other disenfranchised groups without federal intervention.

As we gather here today, we do so in an environment of increasing poverty.

The 2010 Census revealed that 15 percent of all Americans are poor.

In 1968, it was 13 percent.

Although these may be the official Census numbers, we know that poverty is as high as 50 percent in some communities of color.

As we gather here today, racial segregation remains a fact of life if not of policy.

Studying the Census data, sociologist John Logan concluded that although we have laws against discrimination in housing, “Hispanics and African Americans are concentrated in neighborhoods with the highest poverty, worst performing schools, highest crime rates ... even after taking into account what they can afford...”

Officially, black **youth** unemployment is the same as it was in the 60s — more than 30 percent.
And as we gather here today, states are trying to engage the police in the practice of detaining anyone who looks like they might be here illegally.

In Arizona, when they say, “Don’t leave home without it,” they don’t mean your American Express.

They're talking about your green card.

By the way, let me see the hands of those of you who are packing a passport today.

It would be laughable if it wasn't true, but did you hear the one about the German manager visiting the Mercedes-Benz plant in Alabama?

He had nothing to show when the police demanded, “Papers please!” and he was promptly arrested.

At its very core, the Civil Rights Movement was really about equity, fairness, equality of opportunity and equality under the law; one man or woman — one vote.

The stifling...convoluted web of laws that dictated every facet of black people's lives from where they could be born to where they could be laid to rest was intended to distract and divide poor whites and poor blacks.

Segregation on the bus...at the motel or restaurant was all part of a bizarre deadly theater we sacrificed life and limb to escape.

But the real shackles were economic.

Yes, first we had to clear away Jim Crow, but having done that Dr. King turned his attention to the root of the problem, following the writings of W.E.B. Dubois.

Dubois wrote, “The Negro church which stops discrimination against bus riders must next see how those riders can earn a decent living and not remain helplessly exploited by those who own buses and make Jim Crow laws.”

That is exactly the path King chose.

He moved beyond the lunch counter to address workers’ rights, unemployment, education, economic opportunity, healthcare and especially, poverty.

King lived to deliver his “I Have a Dream” speech during the March on Washington in August of 1963.

But he was cut down by an assassin's bullet four days before his march in support of the Memphis Sanitation Workers, in April 1968.
April 4, the day of King's assassination, was also just weeks before his march on Washington in support of his new Poor People’s Campaign.

Notice it was called the “Poor People’s Campaign” — not the “Poor Black People’s Campaign.”

This strategy was both radical and dangerous.

Thousands of poor black and white people were scheduled to march together to Washington to demand jobs...unemployment insurance...a fair minimum wage...and education.

King had castigated the military-industrial complex for diverting resources that a compassionate nation could have used to help the poor.

King said, "...I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic destructive suction tube.”

King made that statement 45 years ago, but substitute “Iraq and Afghanistan” for “Vietnam” and it remains a sad matter of fact today.

For those of you too young to remember, let me tell you that with King’s assassination, African Americans, liberal white Americans and the international community were devastated, depressed and demoralized.

I was one of them.

King had been a Nobel Peace Prize winner.

He was a symbol of hope that America, leader of the free world, would finally live up to her own Declaration “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

In a time of abounding sadness, Coretta Scott King led thousands of women in the Poor People’s March to Washington, on Mother’s Day May 12, 1968.

Reverend Ralph Abernathy assumed the leadership of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference that was responsible for the protest.

Abernathy said, "We come with an appeal to open the doors of America to the almost 50 million Americans who have not been given a fair share of America’s wealth and opportunity, and we will stay until we get it."
In the midst of a presidential primary season, the SCLC set up tents and camped out on the National Mall.

They called it Resurrection City.

Think about that name, Resurrection City.

Today we call it Occupy Wall Street.

There they were, weeks after the death of Dr. King, struggling in the rain and the mud.

Tragically, their tenacity and resolve would be shaken again.

Twenty-three days into the Resurrection City protest, presidential contender Senator Robert Kennedy was assassinated on the night he won the California Primary.

The police rolled in and swept away Resurrection City on June 24, 1968.

Richard Nixon defeated Hubert Humphrey in the presidential election later that year.

In 1958, Du Bois wrote, “Industry realized that, unless industrial organization largely controlled government, it could not control land and labor, monopolize materials, set prices in the world market, and regulate credit and currency…”

According to Du Bois, big business had become “an organized super-government of mankind in matters of work and wages, directed with science and skill for the private profit of individuals.”

It was President Ronald Reagan who reduced the tax rate for the wealthiest Americans from 70 percent to 28 percent.

Reagan slashed the budgets of the Federal Trade Commission and the antitrust division of the Justice Department in half.

He refused to raise the minimum wage and declared open season on the unions by firing every one of the 11,000 striking air-traffic controllers.

It was Reagan’s administration that began this most recent dismantling of government power and authority.

Just as in the first Gilded Age, critics today view our government as a “subsidiary of industry.”
That’s why 43 years after Resurrection City, the center of protest has moved from the nation’s capital to Wall Street.

The BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, earthquakes in Youngstown, Ohio, and the constant onslaught of what used to be considered extreme weather events prove there is no level of risk the corporations will not take with our survival.

So why would we want to leave them in charge?

I know they’re afraid that we’ll figure this out.

That’s why they’re working so furiously to curtail our access to the polls.

That’s why they’re still trying to distract, divide and bully us with comments about “class warfare,” and the characterization of President Barack Obama as the “food-stamp president.”

We have seen how vulnerable a movement can be to the loss of its leader.

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s never recovered from the loss of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. — as the face of the movement.

We cannot allow ourselves to be so vulnerable again.

All of us must take personal responsibility to fight for human rights and human survival.

We cannot wait for someone else to take the lead.

We must all become effective agents of change, in our own way.

When Dr. King was assassinated on April 4, 1968,

I determined that I would not treat others as I had been treated.

I determined that I would become an agent of change, a transformational leader and that I would model leadership for all the black youth that I encounter.

I embraced my parents’ faith in the power of education, the power of the vote and the power of property ownership.

In the mission statements of your agencies, there is text that proclaims you as agents in the service of the public and especially “those who are least able to help themselves.”
You can pursue your work consistent with those missions and King’s dream of a “Beloved community.”

Look at the diversity of your own office staff.

Support internships, mentorships and the progress of people of color through the ranks of your organization.

Establish partnerships with historically black colleges and universities to expand the pool of job applicants you seek.

President Obama frequently quotes Dr. King’s reference to “the fierce urgency of now.”

It is taken from King’s “I Have a Dream” speech and in it, King continues, “This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism.”

We live in precarious times for our economy, our democracy and our survival.

Mohandas Gandhi said, “What is true of the individual will be tomorrow true of the whole nation if individuals will but refuse to lose heart and hope.”

As I bring my comments to a close, I admonish you to never, ever give up.

Never ever give up.
Never ever give up.

Never.