

Lecture of Roy S. Roberts
Charles H. Hackley Distinguished Lecture in the Humanities
First Congregational Church, Muskegon
Monday, May 13, 2013

Good evening.

I can't tell you how pleased I am to be back in my hometown! Although I've lived around this country and throughout the world, Muskegon is and always will be home for me. It is truly an honor to have been asked by the Friends of the Hackley Public Library to deliver this year's Charles H. Hackley Distinguished Lecture in the Humanities.

The Hackley Library has a special place in my heart, and my memories, as somewhere that I could come to dream of the things I would accomplish in my life – and figure out how I might achieve them.

I want to say a special thank you to the Friends of the Hackley Library for this wonderful invitation, including Board President Charles Johnson, Jr. and Board Member Jean Anderson for all of her coordination. I also want to thank Dr. John Mullally for such a warm welcome and introduction, and I would be remiss if I did not also recognize Library Director Martha Ferriby for everything she does to keep this amazing institution moving forward.

When I was asked by Jean Anderson to provide her with the title of my lecture this evening, I thought long and hard about what it might be. After some reflection, I decided that "My Journey from Muskegon to the heights of corporate America to a mission to help children learn," captured what it is that I wanted to share with everyone. That is, the importance of education and perseverance.

Throughout my life I've been faced with challenges. I believe the key to my success has been that I never allowed myself to believe that these challenges were insurmountable. I was also fortunate to have been raised by a father who would not allow me to be anything but the best at everything I did.

My father raised 10 children on his own after my mother died when I was 2 ½ years old. He worked long hours at Campbell Wyatt Cannon and Continental Motors to put food on the table and provide us with a warm, safe home. There were many times, however, when things got tough and we didn't necessarily know where our next meal was coming from.

However, he never allowed any of us to dwell on what we didn't have. Instead he focused us on the fact that we had each other. And, he never let us lose sight of the fact that we could be anything we wanted to be if we took our education seriously.

Throughout my education, including at Muskegon Heights Lindberg Elementary, Muskegon's Angel Junior High and Muskegon Senior High School, I was driven by my father's voice in the back of my head saying, "Keep your head down and focus. Only you can control the outcome." This has remained as a driving force in my psyche throughout my life.

After graduating from high school in 1958 I moved to Grand Rapids, and there were not a lot of jobs available. This presented a serious challenge for me since I had gotten married and my wife was pregnant with our first child.

With nothing to lose, a group of friends and I took some initiative and filled out job applications at Kelvanators. After being told that there were no jobs available, we all left feeling a bit downtrodden. However, I once again heard that familiar voice in the back of my head, "Only you can control the outcome."

So, instead of following my friends to their next destination, I went back to Kalvantors and told the HR Director my situation. I needed \$300 for a deposit so that my wife would be able to have our baby at the hospital. I went to work that very day, and have subsequently never been out of work or had to apply for another job in my life.

After a short period of time, I was recruited to work at Lear, which later became Lear-Siegler. At the same time I was working and raising a family, I was also commuting to Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo to earn my bachelors degree in business administration. After completing my senior year, I went to the top of the highest hill in Kalamazoo and shouted at the top of my lungs, "No one is going to stop me now. I control the outcome." And then, because my father had instilled a strong work ethic in me, and I had strong responsibility to my company, I went back to work instead of going to graduation.

After 17 years on the job at Lear-Siegler, where I developed as a manager and an executive, leading divisions throughout the company, I was recruited to work at General Motors Corporation by Rev. Leon Sullivan, who was a GM board member at the time.

Although I had a good position and an even better paycheck at Lear-Siegler, I decided that I needed to seize the opportunity that working at General Motors presented.

However, with incredible opportunity came incredible challenges...chief among them the fact that I was an African American in a Fortune 500 company at a time when there were not a lot of us. Although I could have viewed this as a hindrance, I chose to view it as a blessing -- again, hearing my father's voice at the back of my head.

Given that I was an African American executive on the rise in one of the Big Three automotive companies, there was never a time where I had any anonymity. My jobs, whether I liked it or not, were all extremely high visibility and high stakes. I was constantly under a microscope.

Again, I chose to view this challenge and as opportunity – not just for me, but for all those who would certainly come after me. I've done that consistently throughout my career because I've been the first African American to hold nearly all of the positions that I've held in my professional life.

My philosophy is that if you have a good batting average you might just win the Ty Cobb Award. Looking at where I am today, I truly believe that I've consistently batted over 500 and given many others the chance to get to first base.

The beginning of my career at GM was spent learning the business from the plant level up. I managed nine auto assembly plants around the country, including Rochester and Tarrytown, New York. My work at Tarrytown was where I caught the eye of GM's executive leadership and received my big corporate break, being named Vice President of Personnel Administration and Development for the entire corporation. In this role, which I held for a little more than two years, I was responsible for more than 950,000 employees globally.

It was also during this time that I was approached by Navistar in Chicago to become their Chief Operating Officer. It was a big risk for me to leave GM, where I rising quickly through the ranks and was now a corporate executive. However, as they say, "No risk, no reward." My reward here was that I had the opportunity to be on a path to becoming the CEO of a major corporation – something I was not sure would ever happen at GM.

Navistar was an awesome experience. The knowledge I gained as an executive was invaluable. But, about a year and a half into it, GM Chairman Roger Smith came to see me. He said, "Roy, it's time for you to come back home."

When the chairman of GM says that, how do you refuse?

I went back to GM and have never regretted it. First because I believe regret is a wasted emotion. Second, because I had the time of my life in my GM 2.0 experience, serving as the highest-ranking African-American executive in the U.S. automobile industry as Group Vice President for North American Vehicle Sales, Service and Marketing of GM.

I was also Vice President and General Manager in charge of Field Sales, Service and Parts for the Vehicle Sales, Service and Marketing Group. And, as Vice President and General Manager of the Pontiac-GMC Division, I led the merger of GM's Pontiac and GMC nameplates, which combined the marketing staffs of those two divisions into a streamlined workforce, and brought innovations and cost-efficiencies to the new Pontiac-GMC.

After 11 years back at GM, I decided it was time for me to retire. I had reached the age at which most GM executives stepped aside, but I also felt like I needed a new challenge. And, for once in my life, I wanted to do something that I wanted to do.

That "something" was the co-founding of a private equity firm in Chicago, which over the course of 12 years raised more than \$220 million dollars and acquired a total of eight companies. Although I loved the business, in order to keep it going we would have had to commit for another 10 years and I was not prepared to make that commitment.

So, my wife Maureen and I retired to our home in Scottsdale to enjoy each others' company and focus on our family, including our four children and six grandsons.

I was a pretty happy retired guy - golfing, traveling, wining and dining my wife - when I took a call from Gov. Rick Snyder in April 2011. He said to me, "Roy, I need your help. The children of Detroit need your help."

He then laid out for me the assignment he wanted to give me – become the Emergency Manager of Detroit Public Schools and reinvent public education in Detroit.

As I weighed my decision, a quote from Marian Wright Edelman, the president and founder of the Children's Defense Fund, kept coming to mind. "If we don't stand up for children, then we don't stand for much."

To me, that quote says it all very simply and succinctly and describes exactly why, with the support of my wife Maureen, I accepted this assignment 24 months ago.

Many people asked me why I took this job. It's really quite simple; it's personal for me. As I shared with you earlier, I came from a background that could be the mirror image of a lot of Detroit's children – a single parent household with multiple mouths to feed and pressures pulling at my father from all ends.

I know the impact an education can have on a child because, quite frankly, education changed my life. I am where I am today because of my education and the teachers and mentors who helped me grow not only my mind but also my character. It was basic for my sojourn in the corporate world, then private equity and now public education.

I would also venture to say that all of you are where you are for this exact same reason.

I have to tell you, this has been the toughest job of my career and I've had some pretty tough jobs. But it's also been, by far, the most rewarding. We are making a real difference in the lives of the children of Detroit!

I think it's critically important that you all understand how far we've come in rebuilding Detroit Public Schools since I was appointed in May 2011. When I began this journey two years ago, Gov. Snyder and I agreed that if Detroit does not improve, we will never be able to reinvent Michigan.

With this foundation as the basis, he gave me two priorities. First and foremost to fix the system so that Detroit's children would get the best education possible, and then, eliminate the crippling deficit that was preventing funds from going into the classroom.

To level-set everyone, let me update you on a few important things.

When I started as Emergency Manager in May 2011, I had 31 people reporting to me, half of whom were contractors – including nine people in academics and the entire finance organization, some of whom only worked part time. This was completely unacceptable. So, I focused on getting the contractors out and hiring people in permanent positions with clear goals and responsibilities.

I'm proud to say that I now have a solid team of professionals, all of whom have deep Detroit roots and a strong commitment to our students. Everyone puts in a full day's work – and then some. They don't complain about the long hours or difficult circumstances we're faced with. Their sole focus is reinventing the district in order to provide our children with the best possible education.

At the same time we were building the team, we were also focused on putting into place processes and procedures that were previously non-existent. This type of work is never sexy, and certainly doesn't get a lot of media coverage. It is, however, the type of behind the scenes, gutsy work that is essential to fixing any system.

These processes and procedures assisted us in our review of all district contracts and we found that many were poorly written and not to our overall benefit. So, I made the decision to cancel all district contracts and make vendors rebid. Let me be clear about something, however; it's not that the vendors were bad or did anything wrong. It's just that the contracts were poorly developed and worked against us in many cases. The outcome of this rebid was \$40 million dollars in savings for the district.

We saved another \$2.2 million dollars by relocating all DPS departments into the six floors we already owned in the Fisher Building. Previously DPS employees had worked in four different buildings on three different blocks. Bringing them all together has allowed for people to get to know each other and for better information exchange and problem solving.

My experience in the corporate world taught me that if you can get people talking to each other in a face-to-face setting, it's easier to not only identify, but quickly resolve problems.

Now I'll turn to district finances.

Two years ago, DPS had a deficit of \$327 million dollars. I'm proud to say that deficit is now only \$76 million dollars, which represents a 73 percent reduction in a little over one year.

I can also report that because of the difficult decisions that were made, including the closing of 9 schools and the chartering of two more, as well as a variety of belt-tightening measures that were implemented, we've reduced our total expenditures by 25 percent in the last fiscal year.

And, for the last two consecutive years, we've turned in balanced budgets on time, AND achieved operating surpluses.

Equally as important, we've completed the audit of our financial statement on time and achieved the best results that we've had in decades, reducing the number of findings by more than 33 percent.

Many of you may also be aware that the US Department of Education classified Detroit Public Schools as one of only two high risk school districts in the country. After seeing the results of this last audit, and hearing passionate, detailed presentations from key department heads recently, we will soon have this unfortunate label lifted from us.

In fact, representatives of the USDE have said that DPS is the fastest improving urban school system in the country. And, last week during a visit to our Thirkell Elementary School, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said he was, “Very, very pleased with the progress Detroit Public Schools is making.” This is quite a statement from the man who called Detroit “ground zero” in the failure of public education in our country.

At the same time we were focusing on reducing the deficit, we were also working to create a stable environment for learning in the district, which had not really existed for the last 7-8 years because in that time, there had also been at least that many leaders.

My goal was not to create shock to the system, but to challenge it and make it better. As the saying goes, I’d be shocked if you always do what you’ve always done and get a better result.

Included in this new approach was the creation of nine self governing schools with decision making power resting with the principal and a governing council made up of parents and concerned, committed community and business volunteers. These are called our Detroit Rising College Preparatory Schools and are led by Chief Innovation Officer Natasha Baker.

Although underway only since September, I’m excited about this new educational model. I believe that it holds real promise for us in not only retaining students, but potentially helping us to capture new market share – which will assist us in further reducing our deficit and focusing more resources on the classroom.

A new state mandate for teacher evaluation/appraisal also plays into this new philosophy. This year for the first time ever, we were able to make strides toward the ultimate goal of putting the most qualified teacher at the front of every classroom.

It might have been less troublesome for us to wait until the state developed its evaluation/appraisal model, but we didn't feel that we could wait even a moment longer. The children of this district and their education are simply too important not just to the future of Detroit, but also to the continued growth of Southeast Michigan.

If there is anything I've learned throughout my career, it's that the most difficult things usually have the most impact. I will tell you that this evaluation/selection process was in no way easy or simple because it meant that some teachers would not be returning to the system.

It was made even more complicated by the fact that 15 Detroit schools were transferred to the state's new Education Achievement Authority and the EAA was not required to hire any of the teachers from these schools, which meant that we would also lose 15 schools worth of teachers - no matter what.

That leads me to the discussion of my involvement with the EAA. I want to be clear that I saw my involvement in the EAA as a way to protect DPS. When the state first approached me with the list of 34 schools that were qualified to be transferred to the EAA because of their long-standing poor performance, I decided that the EAA, as a district in its infancy, did not have the capacity to take on that many schools.

Because of my position as Emergency Manager, I was able to mandate that 15 schools was the appropriate number to be transferred to the EAA. I was also able to mandate that seven schools be removed from the transfer list entirely and have them remain in the Detroit system to work their one year turn-around plans. Had I not been Emergency Manager I would not have been able to control this process so singularly and all 27 schools could have gone to the EAA.

Also as it relates to the EAA, I was, in fact, pleased to be able to work with a talented group of individuals to set policies and procedures for this new district that I believe has a solid model for educating kids, which is really what we should be all about – educating every child in the City of Detroit.

However, now that the new district has been established, and they have successfully begun the school year, earlier this year I resigned as Chairman of the EAA Board of Directors so that 100 percent of my time would be focused on transforming Detroit Public Schools. I have, however, remained an active participant on the board in order to protect the interests of Detroit's school children.

I think this is the perfect place to shift to the discussion of the future. In my mind, the future is all about competition. And, I don't view competition – with the EAA or any other district or even parochial or charter schools – as a bad thing. In fact, I think it's a healthy thing.

No one should have a monopoly on the education of our children. We should all be competing with each other to provide children with the best education possible. The simple fact is that when we compete, our students win.

When I worked at General Motors, nothing made me more proud than converting the owner of a Toyota or a Honda to the owner of a GM vehicle. Now, I'm not comparing our children to cars, but I think we can and should embrace that spirit of competition in education.

We owe it to the children of Detroit to develop the best educational programming options possible and then it's up to their parents to select the best model available for their child.

At DPS, I'm confident that the academic programming we're developing and implementing, including individualized learning plans for every child in our 100 school buildings, as well as our schools with specialized curriculums such as FLICS, Davis Aerospace, Ben Carson Academy, Detroit College Prep and Detroit International Academy are strong options for our parents and students and will provide us with the opportunity to not only maintain but grow our student population.

In fact, this is a trend we're seeing already this school year. We've had more than 1,500 students have come back to DPS from charter schools, and more than 1,900 students have come back to DPS from outside school districts.

While we're encouraged by these numbers, and what they represent, I truly believe that Detroit Public Schools is at the most important crossroads in its history, and that we must make necessary and bold changes quickly in order to ensure that this district will not just survive, but thrive.

To help us achieve this, Detroit Public Schools recently engaged in an historic strategic planning process, involving parents, students, teachers, principals, staff, clergy, civic and community leaders and policy makers – nearly 600 in total – working to help us better understand how to improve our performance and customer service, broaden services and provide desired programs, all within a safe learning environment.

Entitled, "Neighborhood-Centered, Quality Schools," the plan wraps 36 objectives around 12 major goal areas focused on these five central themes: *Starting earlier and working longer, working harder, working smarter, joining together and expecting more.*

I strongly believe that this plan, which was created by the collective community, will be the roadmap we follow to create a stronger, more sustainable district that will not only maintain the students we have, but help us grow and prosper by regaining market share.

It is also designed to dramatically change our mindsets and the way we do things. We must be courageous in our actions and do things that push us as a district out of our comfort zone.

The plan's new initiatives include a strong investment in early childhood education through expanded preschool programs for all four-year-olds and the adoption of a new 12/7 Community Schools Model offering parenting skills and life/job skill training, and a range of local services to be provided at schools during extended hours. Importantly, these services will be developed based on what local schools and parents want and may include homework assistance, language programs, child care and elder care, literacy development, prenatal training, technology skills, financial literacy, social workers and other professional services.

This Community Schools initiative, which will be piloted at nearly 20 schools this coming school year, is designed to make our schools the center or "hub" of the neighborhood.

Now, I'm sure you've all heard that I have decided to retire from DPS at the end of my current contract, which is actually this Thursday. Unlike when I took this job, my decision to leave was not an easy decision. As I stated earlier, these last two years have been the most rewarding of my entire professional life. However, I also have an amazing wife who has stuck with me through thick and thin.

I've had incredible opportunities throughout my career and my wife, Maureen, who by the way is also a Muskegon Senior High School Graduate, has been there along with me the entire way. In fact, when Gov. Snyder approached me about becoming Emergency Manager of DPS, we agreed, TOGETHER, that we had to do it.

However, it is now time for me to really listen to what it is that will make her happy and that is the two of us, spending more time together.

Every time I've told her I'm going to retire – and I've done it two or three times now – she believes me. Well, this time I mean it. I'm not going to let her call me a liar anymore! Many people have asked, how can you leave when the job is not done? Well, I disagree with that statement.

I believe that, essentially, Detroit Public Schools is fixed. There are systems and process in place, a solid strategic plan a strong team that will carry on in the best interest of the children. They will not let anything get in their way of turning Detroit Public Schools around.

And in these last few days, as I meet with them about their importance of staying the course, I'm going to tell them what my father told me, "Keep your head down and focus. Only you can control the outcome."

I want to leave you with a couple of thoughts.

The first is a quote by American anthropologist Margaret Mead that I think captures perfectly the spirit of why I took on my role at Detroit Public Schools. "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens – or even one person - can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

While I know that none of us is trying to change the world, I am certain that in our own way we are all trying to change our little corner of it. So, as my final thought, I ask you this evening to find a way to help our children be the best that they can be and get the education they so rightly deserve.