

NEW SHOES
Frederick Douglass Memorial and Historical Association
Public Meeting
September 15, 2007

Although the sun is shining brightly outside, I hope that no one came here today expecting to see me wearing the kind of Panama hat that Frederick Douglass used to wear. I've seen his hat, his nightshirt and shoes upstairs in his bedroom. I can't help but wonder what it would be like to step inside those shoes.

For 112 years now something has been missing from the halls of the Cedar Hill home. I'm not referring to the family patriarch; I'm referring to the family of Frederick Douglass that has been gone far too long. From the day that Helen Pitts Douglass purchased Cedar Hill, at enormous financial risk, she, those who came after her and those of you from the *Frederick Douglass Memorial and Historical Association* have taken on the responsibility of preserving the legacy of one of this country's greatest heroes. I'm proud and honored to be the one standing here before you to thank you for what you've done and to announce that, from this day forward, the family of Frederick Douglass has returned in support of your efforts.

While we spend some time together this afternoon, I would like to relate how I arrived here by briefly retracing the path of the Frederick Douglass family. I will also beg your indulgence as I propose my family's ideas for moving toward fulfilling the most basic desire of our famous ancestor.

The role of heir to a legacy is never chosen and it is often more a burden than a blessing no matter how bright or talented those heirs may be. For the descendants of a man like Frederick Douglass, who cast as great a shadow as any American ever has, the expectations were all the more daunting. As with every family, the Douglasses have had both their successes and their defeats.

Although it's impossible to calculate his influence, an abridged list of Frederick Douglass' accomplishments may help illustrate his impact:

- He endured and escaped slavery
- He was a gifted orator for the cause of abolition
- He started an abolitionist newspaper called, "The North Star"
- He was an early supporter of women's rights
- He was a champion of the Underground Railroad
- He was an advisor to presidents
- He was a leader of black suffrage
- He was president of Freedman's Savings & Trust
- He was a US Marshal
- He was the American consul-general to Haiti
- He was a popular author having written 3 autobiographies

The Douglass family was cultivated in this magnificent grove of accomplishments.

My great, great grandfather, Charles Redmond Douglass, named after the abolitionist Charles Lenox Redmond, was the third and youngest son of Frederick Douglass and Anna Murray Douglass, born in 1844. When Frederick Douglass began to assemble the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, he was proud to say that Charles was his first African American recruit to join-up to fight against the Confederacy during the Civil War in what had now become a struggle to end slavery. Having trained for battle, however, illness prevented Charles from participating in the hostilities.

After the war, Charles tried to establish himself in a few careers without much luck. He found a government job at the Freedmen's Hospital then he worked as a clerk at the Freedmen's Bureau in Washington DC. In the late 1860's and early 1870's, Charles played right field and was an administrator for a DC baseball club called the Mutuals, who, at that time, were one of the country's best negro teams.

It wasn't until the summer of 1893, however, when Charles purchased 40 acres on the shores of Chesapeake Bay that he found his niche in real estate. Charles subdivided the land and began developing the community of Highland Beach that later became an incorporated town where well-to-do African Americans would come to relax without fear of being harassed by whites. It was there at Highland Beach that Frederick Douglass dreamed of spending his final days sitting in "the tower" at the top of his home along the shore, looking out across the bay to where he had once felt the lash of the overseer's whip and where he had finally escaped the bonds of slavery.

I have fond memories of spending my summers in that house at the beach as a child. I used to sit in "the tower", in his chair, and gaze across the bay toward the shore that looked so far away. I was told, "that is where your great, great, great grandfather lived as a slave when he was a little boy." I was too young to know what that meant, but, now that I am older, I realize how blessed I am to have experienced that time in my life and to have those memories to hold on to. Unfortunately, Frederick Douglass' dream of sitting in "the tower" was never realized. He died before the home was completed.

As with any great figure in history, the legend of Frederick Douglass has only grown since his death. But, on what specific criteria should greatness be based? The brilliant author and mythologist Joseph Campbell said, "A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something that is bigger than oneself." Frederick Douglass was certainly a hero for all he gave to the cause of freedom. And it was Maya Angelou who said, "How important it is to recognize and celebrate our heroes and sheroes!"

Helen Pitts Douglass was a shero of the Frederick Douglass legacy. It's likely that, without her perseverance and courage, many of the relics of the life of Frederick Douglass and that of his family would have been lost forever; gone completely or, perhaps, in the hands of private collectors.

Her work in procuring the Cedar Hill home was only part of the person who was Helen Pitts Douglass. She was the daughter of white abolitionists, a direct descendant of John and Pricilla Alden who arrived on the Mayflower and she was cousin to John and John Quincy Adams. Helen was also active in the women's rights movement and co-edited a radical feminist

newspaper called, *The Alpha*. Perhaps the most challenging time in her life was when she opened herself up to near universal disdain by marrying the man she loved who happened to have been the very popular African American personality, Frederick Douglass.

Joseph Henry Douglass, my great grandfather and the son of Charles, was said to have been the favorite of Frederick Douglass' twenty-one grand children. He's the only grandchild that you will see photographed with his grandfather. Joseph learned how to play the violin from Frederick Douglass. At Cedar Hill the two were often heard playing Schubert in the music room. He later became a concert violinist, once played at the White House and went on to be a teacher of violin. As talented as he was, Joseph was relegated to playing almost exclusively in segregated concert halls.

Frederick Douglass III, my grandfather, was the only male child of Joseph and, perhaps, the one male heir who most felt the burden of the Frederick Douglass legacy. Frederick, a doctor, was said to have possessed a brilliant mind. He was also the man who joined the family of Frederick Douglass with that of Booker T. Washington by marrying *The Great Educator's* granddaughter, Nettie Hancock Washington.

Before the couple's first child was born, the pressure of being the namesake of a legend and all the weight of expectation became too much to endure. Frederick took his own life. Nettie Washington Douglass, my mother, never knew her father, but her mother was there for her as was her grandmother, Fannie Howard Douglass.

Great grandmother Fannie, or Grandmere as we called her, married Joseph Douglass and was my direct link to Frederick Douglass. As a child, she met Frederick Douglass on a few occasions. Of course, she didn't know at the time that she would one day marry his grandson. As a mortician, her father was a prominent businessman in Atlanta and one of America's first black millionaires. The family would host Frederick Douglass when he visited Atlanta. I remember sitting on Grandmere's lap as she told us what it was like to meet the great man with the great big white hair.

When I tell people what my relationship is to Frederick Douglass, it's not only a mouthful saying "great, great, great grandson," but, with all of the "greats", it sometimes makes me feel very far removed. Yet when I talk about the generations from Charles Douglass to Joseph to Frederick III to my mother then to Grandmere, who actually met Frederick Douglass, it doesn't feel far at all. And when I stop to think the hands that actually touched the great Frederick Douglass, touched mine, it seems that history was right in front of me.

What I've realized is that history doesn't really go anywhere; it's just the frenzy of everyday life that obscures it like a fog. That's why we need organizations like the *Frederick Douglass Memorial and Historical Association* to tell these stories whenever people are ready to listen. And, while I still have the microphone and hoping people are still listening to me, I'd like to, once again, recognize one more of the heroes of this fine association: Mrs. Vivian Smith. Thanks for all you do to support the preservation of the Frederick Douglass legacy.

While on the subject of sheroes, I'd like you all to say hello to my mother, Nettie Washington Douglass. Whereas the Douglass family has mostly been remiss in its commitment and public support to the memory of Frederick Douglass, my mother has been carrying the torch all of these years. She has been out there speaking eloquently about her heritage and making appearances since she was a little girl. She is the first product of the Frederick Douglass/Booker T. Washington link.

Mom was born in the historic town of Tuskegee Institute, Alabama. As a small child, she began representing one or both of our famous ancestors at special events. Later, she chose to keep a low profile, while directing her attention and energy to what she describes as her "career of choice" – that of raising yours truly along with my siblings.

I'm Kenneth B. Morris Jr. and I'm the great, great, great grandson of Frederick Douglass. I am also the great, great grandson of Booker T. Washington. Four years ago I would never have believed that today I'd be standing in front of a group of people saying those words. My heritage was certainly not kept from me, but I wasn't really encouraged to do anything about it perhaps because of the tragic effect the responsibility to uphold the legacy had on my grandfather. In fact, my mother and father made a conscious decision to allow me to grow and become my own man. I know if you were to ask her if that strategy worked, she would probably say "he's here today, so I must have known what I was doing." Growing up I didn't even bother telling anyone about my famous ancestry because, the few times I did, people simply didn't believe me and I didn't feel it was a point worth arguing.

I was born in Washington DC, the oldest child to Kenneth B. Morris Sr. and Nettie Washington Douglass. I grew up in California with my sister Nettie Douglass and brother Douglass Washington. As you can see by these names, my mother and father's strategy of allowing their kids to grow as their own persons must have changed after I was born. I have been married for 23 years to my beautiful wife, Diana. I have two beautiful daughters, Jenna who is 12 and Nicole, 9. I found some very modest success early as a singer in the entertainment field before I began a career as a sales and marketing consultant within the travel industry. I have owned my own business for the past 17 years and, prior to four years ago, I assumed I would continue as an every man entrepreneur named Morris while attending the occasional Booker T. Washington family reunion.

So, what happened four years ago? I discovered, with the help of a friend and business associate, where my responsibility lies. And, because I was able to find it, rather than being born with that responsibility, it has motivated me as would an opportunity instead of a burden.

In September 2003, National Geographic magazine published a story called 21st Century Slaves. The first line of the article read, "There are more slaves today than were seized from Africa in four centuries of the trans-Atlantic slave trade." That friend of mine showed me the article and offered an idea that seemed to make sense. "Slavery still exists," he said, "And the biggest reason it thrives today is that it operates in the shadows. The best way to stop this is to tell people about it. He went on to say who is more qualified, who is more obligated to tell the world about modern-day slavery than the descendants of slaves and abolitionists?"

After studying the issue of modern-day slavery, I found that up to 27 million people in the world are living today as slaves in conditions as horrific as the slavery with which we're most familiar. 80% of those people are female and 50% are children. UNICEF estimates that more than 200,000 children from West and Central Africa are sold into slavery each year. An estimated 200,000 to 300,000 children are working only for food in India's carpet factories. About 300,000 child soldiers are involved in conflicts around the globe. Approximately 12% of the world's five to seventeen year olds work in the worst forms of child labor. In parts of Asia, young girls and boys are being sold by their own parents to endure a life of prostitution. And, even here in the United States, estimates run into the tens of thousands of forced laborers with nearly half involved in prostitution and sex services.

Americans generally don't know about modern-day slavery and human trafficking. Most don't know that Congress passed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act in 2000. Most don't know that there are still U.S. states with no laws on the books addressing human trafficking. Most have no idea that there are forms of forced labor hidden right under their noses in their own communities. Modern-day slavery is a human rights abuse and a humanitarian problem. In 2003, the U.S. State Department said, "Trafficking in persons is one of the greatest human rights challenges of all time."

The *Emancipation Proclamation* has no jurisdiction within the boundaries of human trafficking. According to US government figures, human trafficking has surpassed arms trafficking as the second most lucrative illegal trade behind drug trafficking. The reason some experts believe that human trafficking may soon be the world's leading illegal trade is because humans are, to a certain extent, a renewable resource. Once bought or sold they will produce in service or labor many times their cost. Think about this, when the drugs or arms are sold, they are gone. But, when a human being is bought and sold over and over again, the profits keep flowing in.

But this is nothing new. It's in the value of one human where slave traders and owners have made their fortunes for thousands of years. Thanks, however, to people like William Wilberforce, John Brown, Ida B. Wells, Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln and many others, the state sanctioned practice of slavery has officially ended.

The scourge of Modern-day slavery afflicts every civilized and uncivilized country in the world as well as every race in the human family. Its victims are black, white, Latin, Asian, Indian and everything in between. The only common denominator seems to be that its victims tend to be poor. Of course, being on the lowest rung of the economic ladder, mostly uneducated and enslaved makes it difficult to find people that care let alone those who will represent you.

So, why is it that the descendants of slaves and abolitionists should become the new leaders of this cause? Well, here's my thought: if there is any community that must raise up new leaders it's the African American community. Just a couple of statistics that might support that statement:

- Nearly 25% of black households still live in poverty.
- While representing only 13% of the U.S. population, over 40% of the male prison population is African American.
- African American adolescents last year represented more than 60% of all homicides.

- Black men account for nearly 45% of all newly diagnosed HIV cases.

What is the underlying reason for these appalling numbers? Of course the answer is complicated in many ways, but one of them is not that today's African American youth has too much guidance, or too many positive role models in their lives or too much education.

We are the sons and daughters. We are the grandsons and the granddaughters. We are the products of slavery. We are the products of the abolition of slavery. From Frederick Douglass we learned that we have the right to be free. From Booker T. Washington we learned how to make our way in the world as free citizens. From Martin Luther King Jr. we learned that, as free citizens, we have the same rights as all citizens. Who then is more qualified to speak out against the injustices and the kind of abuses our people survived?

If there are leaders among us we must stand beside them. And, as we address the challenges within our own community, we, as products of the struggle, must help shed light and rage against the industry of forced labor and slavery here at home and around the world. Martin Luther King, Jr. said "our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our culture and our nation. What this means is, we must develop a world perspective."

So, it is with this obligation in mind that we announce the formation of the Frederick Douglass Family Foundation. Our mission is as follows:

As one of history's most noted Abolitionists, Frederick Douglass dedicated himself to the cause of freedom and that of equality for every man and woman. The Frederick Douglass Family Foundation will continue the work of its prominent namesake by raising awareness of the enduring crisis of modern-day slavery wherever it may exist. Funds that are raised through the foundation will go to support organizations that are working to stop modern-day slavery and those assisting its victims.

When contemplating the mission, it was a given that we would honor and preserve the legacy of Frederick Douglass. But, we quickly came to the conclusion that anything we decided to do would have to be true to the character of this great man. Frederick Douglass was an American visionary and, in my mind, any organization bearing his name could not just be about history. While we understand our obligation to pass on our story to future generations so that they know from where they came, we knew we had to use this platform to be an organization that was about our future.

First and foremost, Frederick Douglass was an abolitionist. If he were here today, what would he do about these horrible injustices? Would he be a modern-day abolitionist? His goal was to end slavery and slavery still exists. I believe that he would have expected his family to continue his fight.

At its core, our effort will always parallel those of the *Frederick Douglass Memorial and Historical Association* as the organization's original charter says, "to preserve to posterity the memory of the life and the character of the late Frederick Douglass." We will support your organization and the Cedar Hill home as we would our own family. And as we embrace and ask to be embraced by those who wish to preserve the memory of Frederick Douglass, we also

reserve the right to censure those who diminish it. I want you to know that we are reaching out to all of Frederick Douglass' true descendants and we are asking them to join hands with us to continue the fight. We have a lot of work to do.

As I stand here today, in a setting like this, amongst my family, my friends and the images of ancestors, many of whom had come "Up From Slavery", I think about my own role, my own responsibility and I think about the debt that I owe to those who came before me. And it makes me wonder whether I'll ever be a leader who helps make a difference in people's lives. When I was growing up, the challenges faced by great men like Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington were apparent to me because it so happens that their blood runs through my veins.

But the fact is, most of us live far from the cotton fields and we worry more about the Redskins beating the Eagles on Monday night than we do about the threat of being beaten by our overseers. We live in modern times and the echoes from the days of slavery are hard to hear from where we stand.

But if we all listen close enough, we'll hear cries not echoes from the slaves of today. That's when change will happen.

Now, I'm never going to try on those shoes upstairs, not because it would take an act of congress to get me past the velvet rope barrier to get to them, but because they won't fit. You may have noticed that I'm no Frederick Douglass. But I'm going to take the shoes I've got and fight the fight that he already fought and only hope that you will all come along. I thank you for listening.