

Ambassador Shari Villarosa Remarks
Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington and of Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" Speech

Thank you Lord Mayor for joining us today, and for graciously allowing us to use this facility to host this program in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington for rights and freedom. I would also like to thank Mauritius Telecom who has generously provided time and connection capability to allow us to carryout this virtual, global film screening.

Dr. Martin Luther King was only 34 years old and the speech he made that day still inspires people around the world.

The United States moved slowly in fulfilling the promise of our Declaration of Independence, which states that "We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal." For a good part of our history, these words were not true for a large segment of our population. At independence, only white men with property could vote. The wealth requirement gradually disappeared and women were guaranteed the constitutional right to vote in 1920. Although African-Americans were legally freed from slavery by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863, this action alone did not permit them to enjoy all the rights of their fellow citizens.

After World War II, African-Americans who bravely fought and died for their country, demanded their full rights as American citizens. The Supreme Court ruled against segregated schools in 1954, and some states shut their schools rather than let black and white children study together. The civil rights movement began gaining broader public support after television showed the brutal tactics employed by law enforcement officials against peaceful protestors who wanted to vote. The American people recoiled against the hatred that resulted in the death of four little girls at an African American church in Birmingham.

100 years after slavery was officially ended, African American leaders came forward to challenge the establishment, they built coalitions across racial lines, and they organized a peaceful march on Washington in protest of the nation's treatment of its black citizens.

On August 28, 1963, an estimated 250,000 people marched to the Lincoln Memorial in Washington. It was the largest gathering of its kind in Washington at that time. We remember it today for Dr. King's speech of unsurpassable eloquence. Known ever since for its "I Have a Dream" passages, Dr. King gave impassioned voice to the demands of the U.S. civil rights movement -- equal rights for all citizens, regardless of skin color, in accord the Declaration of Independence. He did not speak just to African Americans, but to all Americans. Dr. King painted a picture of an America in which his children, and all people, would be judged not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.

His words resonated widely, and deeply influenced Americans of all races, who increasingly questioned the second class treatment of African-Americans. Hundreds and thousands of ordinary citizens joined together in indignation against racial discrimination. We as a nation experienced a nonviolent revolution -- a revolution of values, a revolution of ideas -- that served to strengthen the rule of law by ensuring that it was applied fairly to ensure equal justice and freedom for all.

Less than a year after the march, President Lyndon Johnson signed into law the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which banned discrimination in public facilities and prohibited employment

discrimination. The following year, the Voting Rights Act was enacted to ensure that African Americans had the right to vote in reality as well as on paper.

The new laws took effect immediately. Yet it still took more time for social attitudes to evolve. In a 1963 Newsweek poll, 74 percent of whites said racial integration was "moving too fast." 40 years later, in a 2000 *New York Times* poll, the evolution was striking: 93 percent of whites said they would vote for a qualified black presidential candidate.

This evolution led to that cold day in January 2009, when we inaugurated our first African-American president, Barack Obama. Something that would have been unthinkable just 50 years ago became a reality. Fifty years is a long time, which shows how difficult it is to change deep-seated attitudes. But it also shows that societies themselves CAN change, positively on the side of tolerance and respect.

If Dr. King were alive today, he would likely applaud the achievements of the past 50 years. But he would also remind us that his dream has not yet been fully realized, particularly in terms of equality of economic opportunity. We must continue to work harder to close the lingering economic and educational disparities that remain, so all people can achieve their dreams.

As for Dr. King, his dream at the March on Washington is now part of the political mainstream, his birthday a national holiday in honor of his ideas and his memory. Political leaders from both major parties supported a memorial to be built in his honor in the nation's capital alongside the giants of American history -- Presidents George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Dr. King's dream now is accepted as irrefutable truth by the overwhelming majority of Americans -- a measure of how much a nation and a people can grow and change.

And not just Americans. Throughout his short life of just 39 years, Dr. King fought for racial and social justice everywhere, not just in the United States. He traveled the world proclaiming his vision of the "beloved community," and defining racism as a worldwide evil. "

Wherever I have been in the world during my career, I am proud as an American to learn how much people know about the civil rights movement and Dr. King -- often in very specific detail. I regularly cite the civil rights movement as an example of how nonviolent action by minorities can gain majority support. The March on Washington 50 years ago succeeded in touching the whole world, in addition to America. Today as we meet, the Blue Penny Museum on the Caudan Waterfront is hosting a «We Have A Dream » exhibit, celebrating not only the non-violent principles of Dr. King, but of other courageous figures such as Nelson Mandela and Ghandi.

The world they imagined is one that we can all strive for. I hope that all of you here today are inspired by their examples to promote social justice, wherever injustice exists. Your own work towards social justice will continue to honor and celebrate the work of courageous individuals of the past in the years to come.

We will start our virtual program now, but after, I invite you to take a look at our Papershow exhibit, « The Dream Continues », which will be displayed under the patio for an entire week.

Thank you. Enjoy the program.