

Good Evening.

Thank you. I am humbled by this honor. This award holds a special place in my heart because I grew up on the campuses of three historically black universities: Jackson State, Tennessee State and Norfolk State.

I want to thank my Mother and Father, Anna and Harrison Wilson, and my stepmother Lucy Wilson, for their love and support. Each of them is a graduate of a university which is a beneficiary of this Gala.

I also wish to thank my wife, Merinda, and daughter, Rachel, and the many family members and friends who are sponsors and have traveled to be here tonight.

I wish to take a moment to speak for those not in the room tonight. All across America, Black and Latino boys and girls are facing long odds. Almost 50% of the black boys still in school in the ninth grade have dropped out by the 12th grade. Tonight is

about ensuring that those who survive to the 12th grade have a chance.

However, my *special* plea is that we never forget those who do not make it that far. **Now**, more than ever, we need teachers who will not throw in the towel, when others give up on our children and say they cannot learn. **Now**, more than ever, we must ensure that our students have the resources, facilities, and necessary support to prepare them to meet the great changes facing America and the world. These challenges require the efforts of America's best minds. Some of these best minds attend the universities we support this evening.

Nelson Mandela said, “[e]ducation is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” I don’t know about you, but I am not interested in a *little* change – we need *transformational* change.

Thank you for what you are doing to make transformational change possible in the lives of the students who are the beneficiaries of tonight’s Gala.