

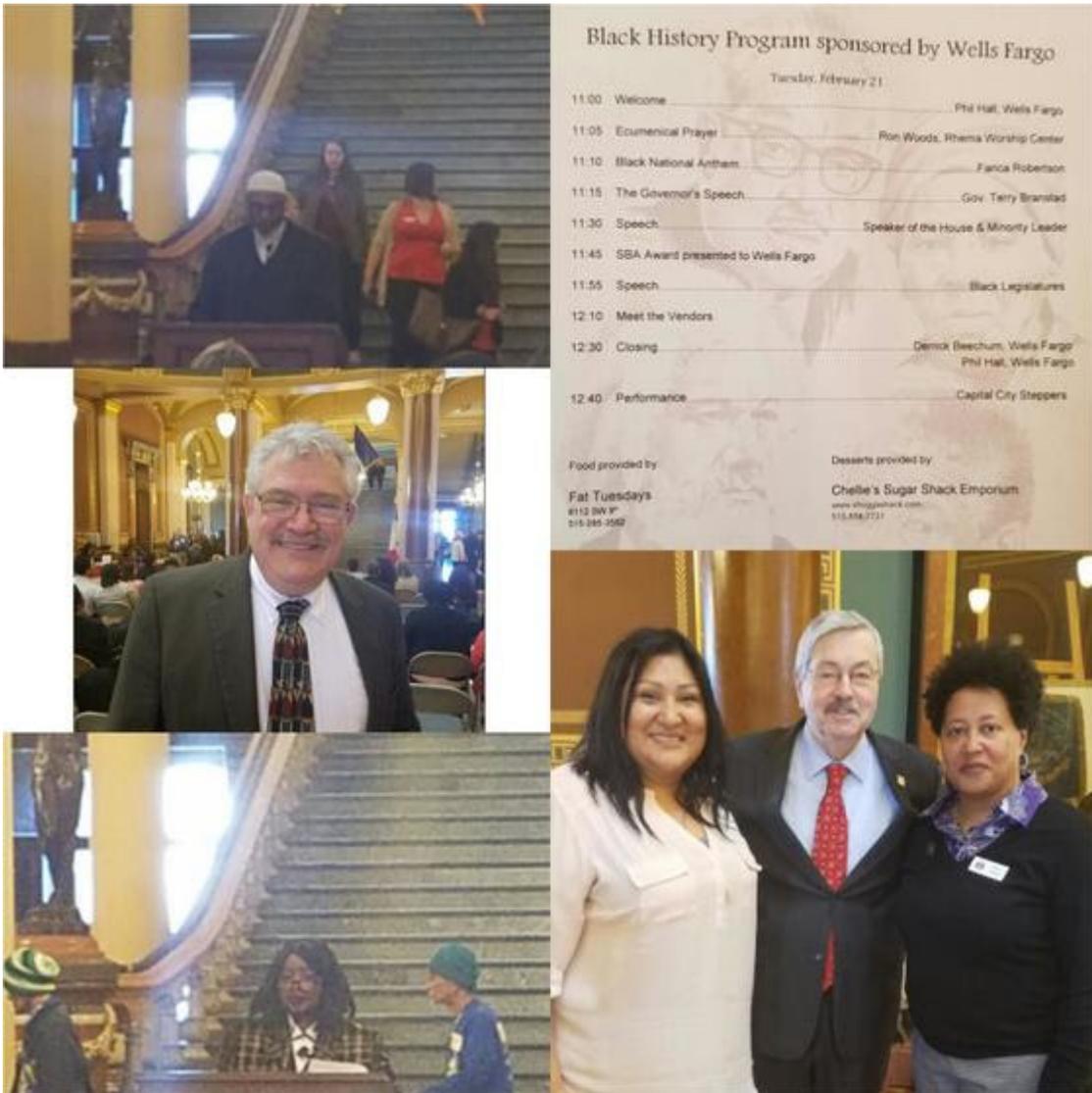
Let's Talk Human Rights!



Division of Community Advocacy and Services

- Office of Asian and Pacific Islanders
 - Office of Deaf Services
 - Office of Latino Affairs
 - Office of Persons with Disabilities
 - Office of Native Americans
 - Office on the Status of African Americans
 - Office on the Status of Women
-

Black History Month Celebration at the Capitol on February 21, 2017



Speech from Representative Mark D. Smith

Good morning and welcome to the statehouse for the celebration of the contributions of Iowans who are of African descent.

I'd like to begin my comments today starting with Scripture from the Song of Solomon 1:5. When the Revised Standard Version of the Bible was published in 1952, this scripture was translated as "I am black, but beautiful." In 1989, the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible was published, this scripture was accurately translated as, "I am black and beautiful."

For too long in our nation, we have used the word "but" instead of "and" when it comes to the relationship between White America and Black America. We have said that our African American brothers and sisters are equal but you've had to battle onerous restrictions to vote in elections.

We've said that our African-American brothers and sisters are equal but you had to attend Negro colleges rather than being welcomed into all other colleges and universities. We have said that all men are created equal, but we incarcerate our African American brothers at disproportional rates that are simply unbelievable and unacceptable.

We say that all people are equal before the law, but we know that the darker one's skin is the more likely that they are going to receive the stiffest sentences in our courts of law.

We say that all people are given an equal chance at the American dream, but more of our African-American brothers and sisters live in poverty.

We say that all people are given the chance to obtain an education so they can compete in a global economy but our public schools are underfunded and thus widening the gap between African-American and white American society.

It is past time for us to move "but" to "and" so that all Americans and all lowans know that they are accepted, that they are valued, that they are people of worth, and that each of us is truly equal to, not greater or lesser than, each other.

When we accomplish that, we can say to each other: "I am a person and I am beautiful."

This is when we truly celebrate that George Washington Carver, who attended not one but two Iowa Colleges, contributed to his world by being one of the four lowans who fed the world.

This is when we truly celebrate that Iowa is a state that has always opposed the enslavement of people.

This is when we can truly celebrate that Iowa de-segregated its schools 86 years before the rest of the country.

This is when we can truly celebrate that Iowa is a state that affirmed equal protection under the law nearly a century before the remainder of the country.

Indeed, then all lowans can say, "I am a person, I am respected for my worth, and my contributions are valued by the people with whom I share this state."

The Disability Rights Movement

Throughout the years, persons with disabilities have had to battle against centuries of biased assumptions, harmful stereotypes, and irrational fears. In early times, children born with disabilities were hidden and sometimes even killed. In the 1800s, people with disabilities were considered meager, tragic, pitiful individuals unfit and unable to contribute to society, except to serve as ridiculed objects of entertainment in circuses and exhibitions. They were assumed to be abnormal and feeble-minded, and numerous persons were forced to undergo sterilization. People with disabilities were also forced to enter institutions and asylums, where many spent their entire lives. The "purification" and segregation of persons with disability were considered merciful actions, but ultimately served to keep people with disabilities invisible and hidden from a fearful and biased society.

This continued until World War I when veterans with disabilities expected that the US government provide rehabilitation in exchange for their service to the nation. In the 1930s the United States saw the introduction of many new advancements in technology as well as in government assistance, contributing to the self-reliance and self-sufficiency of people with disabilities.

Despite these initial advancements made towards independence and self-reliance, people with disabilities still did not have access to public transportation, telephones, bathrooms and stores. Office buildings and work sites with stairs offered no entry for people with

disabilities who sought employment, and employer attitudes created even worse barriers. Otherwise talented and eligible people with disabilities were locked out of opportunities for meaningful work.

By the 1960s, the civil rights movement began to take shape, and disability advocates saw the opportunity to join forces alongside other minority groups to demand equal treatment, equal access and equal opportunity for people with disabilities. In the 1970s, disability rights activists lobbied Congress and marched on Washington to include civil rights language for people with disabilities into the 1972 Rehabilitation Act. In 1973, the Rehabilitation Act was passed, and for the first time in history, civil rights of people with disabilities were protected by law.

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) provided equal opportunity for employment within the federal government and in federally funded programs, prohibiting discrimination on the basis of either physical or mental disability. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act also established the Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board, mandating equal access to public services (such as public housing and public transportation services) to people with disabilities, and the allocation of money for vocational training.

In 1990 the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was passed to guarantee equal access to public education for all children with disabilities into regular classes, but also focused on the rights of parents to be involved in the educational decisions affecting their children.

After decades of campaigning and lobbying, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed in 1990, and ensured the equal treatment and equal access of people with disabilities to employment opportunities and to public accommodations. The ADA intended to prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability in: employment, services rendered by state and local governments, places of public accommodation, transportation, and telecommunications services.

Under the ADA, businesses were mandated to provide reasonable accommodations to people with disabilities (such as restructuring jobs or modifying work equipment), public services could no longer deny services to people with disabilities (such as public transportation systems), all public accommodations were expected to have modifications made to be accessible to people with disabilities, and all telecommunications services were mandated to offer adaptive services to people with disabilities. With this piece of legislation, the US government identified the full participation, inclusion and integration of people with disabilities in all levels of society.

While the signing of the ADA placed immediate legislative demands to ensure equal access and equal treatment of people with disabilities, deep-rooted assumptions and stereotypical biases were not instantly transformed with the stroke of a pen. People with disabilities still face prejudice and bias with the stereotypical portrayal of people with disabilities in the movies and in the media, physical barriers to schools, housing and to voting stations, and lack of affordable health care. The promise of the ADA is yet to be fully realized, but the disability rights movement continues to make great strides towards empowerment and self-determination of Americans with disabilities.

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