

US Senate Chaplain's Words Inspire IRD Staff

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In 2012 IRD headquarters staff launched an initiative called “IRD Gives Back.” Among our many activities was to organize a career day for a Washington DC youth group known as UPO POWER, which supports vulnerable high school students to complete their studies and continue to college. In acknowledgment of IRD’s support, UPO Executive Vice President Andrea Thomas invited IRD staff Adora Iris Lee and Will Pelant to its Annual Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Breakfast, held January 12 in Washington DC.

Participants were treated to an electrifying keynote address by Dr. Barry Black, Chaplain of the US Senate. Dr. Black personally knew Dr. King from his college days at the University of Alabama in Huntsville. He said that when he first heard King speak, he was just an average young college man with no clear vision for his future. But as soon as King spoke, Black said “a light switch went on inside me.” Black invited the audience to consider that their lives should be about pursuing greatness. “If I am a street sweeper, then I should be the greatest street sweeper I can be, molding my craft to make concrete shine like marble! If I am a mechanic then I should strive to be the best mechanic! But all of us, whether street sweeper or mechanic or nurse...can all achieve greatness by striving to exercise the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. At the end of the day and at the end of our lives we should reflect, ‘Did I try to feed the hungry? Did I try to clothe the naked? Did I try to visit the sick? Did I try to ransom the imprisoned? Did I try to comfort the sorrowful?’”

Since its founding in 1962, UPO’s philosophy and mission have been “a city of thriving communities and self-sufficient residents.” The key to achieving this philosophy, UPO believe, is education. Jennifer Hernandez, the recipient of this year’s Joseph A. Beavers Scholarship, told participants that as a single young mother she would never have dreamed of getting her master’s degree in social work had it not been for UPO’s assistance. She is now a freshman at Trinity University. And Beverly Barbor, the recipient of the 2012 Adult Construction Trade award, said that after having lost her job and exhausted unemployment, she and her five sons found themselves homeless, “but not hopeless” thanks to the training she received at the UPO Weatherization training Center as a part of the Sweat Equity program. Beverly has since worked her way up to assistant project manager for a construction company.

IRD’s partnership with UPO has taught us a lot – and provided us with an opportunity to share our knowledge as well. Dr. Black’s reflections on Dr. King, and his advice to pursue greatness no matter what we do, were an inspiration to us, personally and professionally.

Photo: Adora Iris Lee, UPO Executive Vice President Andrea Thomas, and Will Pelant. In back on left are US Senate Chaplain Dr. Barry Black and on right Washington DC Mayor Vincent Gray.