

# LACK OF ACCESS TO THE LAW: SAVING BLACK AMERICANS A SEAT AT THE LEGAL TABLE SYMPOSIUM TRANSCRIPT

## OPENING REMARKS

*Benjamin L. Crump:* Good morning. I would say, I wouldn't be honest, if I didn't say it was a lot of humbling looking up at the sign. I'm so grateful to President Armstrong, and to the Board of Trustees here at St. Thomas University, to be proactive, and moving us all forward as a society to say that we can be better, we can make sure that the highest respect to the humanity, and each and every one of us, is respected. And so, for that, I want to give a big round of applause to President Armstrong. And *[Audio Skips]* [0:52:34.1]

So, initially, this morning, it was going to be and Armstrong Williams talking. And unfortunately, he had to go back because a matter came up. But it was going to be interesting, because even though Armstrong Williams and I are dear friends and brothers, we oftentimes have very different philosophies on issues. And so, what I'm going to do is try to talk about things that I believe, but also try to give credence to things that I will imagine, had he been here, how Armstrong Williams would try to tell me, no, no, it's not that clear cut being crop. And, you know, I guess the first thing I will start with, and we're gonna get to talking about access not only to justice, but access to capital, access, as President Armstrong said, to the decision making of society in America that oftentimes is controlled in many ways by corporate America, and people in the C-suite.

And as I talked to many corporations around America, and it's always funny, where they pay me to come and speak and, you know, they know who I am. And I know what I'm going to say, but they still invite me, I always believe if you get an opportunity to speak truth to power, you do it no matter what, you always do it, because if you don't do it, the question remains, if it will ever be said to the people who need to hear. And so, it's always funny that if I go, and I tell them, you know, you we find that your bias and you can be better. And they say, "Okay, we want to try, we're not going to push back on it there because you have a different perspective.". But the beautiful thing about that whole dynamic is we try to listen to one another. Oftentimes, you have people who say it's my

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way or the highway, or they draw a line in the sand, and they never, ever will consider the other perspective.

The great Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes talked about that when he said, a mind stretched by a new idea never gains its former dimensions. And so, we should endeavor to all be lifelong learners. And every day, have our mind stretch just a little further by a new idea. We should be ashamed if we go to bed and say that I did not come across a new idea today that I had never thought of. And that's what I tried to do. It makes you better when you try to learn from other people who don't think like you. John (Karvik) is here. I want to stop for a second and give a big round of applause to my dear friend John. Because I will tell you, President Armstrong for as long as I can remember John has always put his money where his mouth and they've had a minority mentoring picnic where they would try to pair young students who had historically been denied access to give them access in the legal profession.

So, John, that's never lost on any of us. what you have done over the balance of, I think 30 years now. So, yeah, give him a round of applause. And so talking about just that perspective of different ideas and so forth, we have to agree that we can be we can disagree, but not be disagreeable. And what I always believe, you know, I will respect your disagreeing with me, as long as it's not me having to accept the denial of my humanity.

So, a good place to start, I think is we have the tragedy of Tyre Nichols and we will advance the conversation his parents happen to be kind enough to be with us yesterday, his mother RowVaughn Wells and his father Rodney Wells. And remember, what RowVaughn said, she talked about the fact that that any of those officers see to humanity and Tyre. You know, Tyre Nichols case was very difficult on many levels, because you have five black police officers, who, for reasons that are still inexplicable to me, could not see the humanity in this young man who they continue to brutalize. And I had to take a step back, because I said, I shouldn't feel this, just completely compromised. And my soul said, where I have so much trouble that those black officers can see the humanity and Tyre. I should feel the same way, if they were white officers, it should not matter what the race of the officer is.

Any human being should see the humanity and our fellow human being, regardless of skin color. And so, we have to change our mentality, we have to rise to a different level, we have to be better than what we saw not just a Tyre Nichols video, but also on the George Floyd video.

It has to be a respect for humanity, that we believe in humanity, we believe that all of us have something to offer in the world, I think so often about when we talk about the least of these, you know, it sounds like a cliché. But if, if the least of us can have equal opportunities, add the American promise of life, and liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, then what it's really saying is, all of us can have it. But if the least of us cannot, then we all have to be concerned. We all

have to be concerned that your access to justice, your access to life and liberty can be taken away.

I'm on the board of the Innocence Project. And the Innocence Project has these statistics. And they opine, and they have documented that at least 100,000 people are sitting in prison, who are completely innocent, that is disproportionately people of color. But there are some white people also sitting in prison who are completely innocent. And that's why we have to remind everybody that is never just about me, or one group, but it's always about us. And when you start to stretch your mind, even if I had been conditioned, I grew up in a black community in North Carolina, on the black side of town and that kind of thing. But if in my life, thinking the same perspective as when I was a young boy, then how much have I grown? And you have to ask yourself that same question to how much have I grown have I actually listened to other people talk about the things that they find are important in life, I'm never going to be arrogant enough to say, I know everything, I have all the answers. But what I do know is that we can figure them out together, if all of us at the table together with an open mind.

And I don't expect us all to agree, that wouldn't be the most productive table, if we're sitting down, and we all agree, you know, for years in America, we've had executive board rooms, whether on the corporate level, or at the White House, or at the Supreme Court of the United States, the state Supreme Court was just all white men. And they come from the same culture, the same background, the same colleges and education institutions, if it was our state, it was always the University of Florida, St. Thomas is going change that.

And they will keep producing the same ideas, keep producing the same outcomes. And it really makes you think about that cliché. You know, the definition for a [Unclear] [1:03:03.6] father, as if we continue to do the same thing and expect different results. That table has to not only talk about diversity, but it has to show diversity, just when we look at it, I think about you know, Jesse Jackson, I have a great quote. And I always like to share when I get a chance with people to talk about it. Jesse Jackson said that, before Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier, in sports in America. The critics all said that if we have black people, and brown people allowed to play Major League Baseball, it would bring down the quality of the game.

And Jesse Jackson said, the truth of the matter was, we did not know how good baseball could be until we let everybody play. And that's what you have to say. Unless we have everybody at the table, we don't know what we can produce, you know, is fundamental. If two heads are better than one, their four heads are better than two, eight heads better than four. So, if we get all types of people with different perspectives, and different philosophies sitting down at a table. And we say, because we're in law school, and we say we got to be on this widget, and we got to make it better. We go get the widget. And we say this is what we got. This will have been produced for years. And it's been good. We've been successful. We had the boardroom table. But you know what? If we are

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complacent, and we stay where we add, then we will lose our edge, our competitive edge.

And ever if you had a corporate boardroom and if you understand anything about corporations, as President Armstrong understands, you know, America is a capitalistic society and free enterprise is built on the fact, can you build a better widget, you know, build a better mousetrap, and the world will be a pathway to your door. And so why are you sitting here Robin and you try to figure out how to make this widget better. If I had everybody at that table, and I know I'm beating the dead horse, but I want you out to walk away and say, Man, I don't want to be at the table on people who look like me sound like me come from the same background as me, claim coaches me. I want to be challenged. And I welcome the challenge of different people in different mentalities.

And so that widget will never ever evolve. Unless we have women perspective at that table, unless we have different ethnicities that table, unless we have different ages at that table, right before I came here, and right before the State of the Union address, I was invited to speak to AARP, up in Washington DC at that national headquarters. And it was kind of deep, because they, made me think a different way. They said, you know, we don't often talk about ageism. And we don't often talk about the value of our seniors and so forth.

And it, it kind of stopped me dead in my tracks, because I never had really thought about that as a true challenge. And I don't know why I'm getting a little older, but you start to think about these things. But John, it was so deep man. Because when I really thought about it, I said, man, in American society today, we tend to give all of the consideration to these young people in the young generation, that's all we keep talking about. But in many societies, like African ancestry and Asian ancestry, you know, we forget what they often do, they give the greatest value to the elders, in the seniors, the people who have life experiences, the people who have a perspective that says, I have learned over time. And so, I thought about that. And then I started thinking about my grandmother, who I think is the wisest person to have, you know, I met on the face of this earth, and she only had an eighth-grade education, but she had, you know, common wisdom, that King Solomon type wisdom.

I remember President Armstrong, when I was a little boy, and it was cold, and you didn't want to go to school, you say, grandma it's bad weather out there, cold weather, my grandmother would say stuff, like, there's no such thing as bad weather. It's just people who didn't properly prepare for the weather. And, you know, its perspective, with her age, her wisdom, her experience, and I just think about, those are the people who we should exalt in society, but oftentimes, we don't value them, we don't have a healthy respect for them. I mean, they, especially now with dementia and different aspects of life, instead of trying to spend as much time and gain that wisdom from our parents and our grandparents before they leave us, we oftentimes take it for granted that they're going to be

around and I will tell you, man, until you lose a parent, or grandparent, you truly don't understand how valuable every day was to try to learn from them.

So, that's what we must continue to do is try to stretch our minds in every way imaginable to be the best version of ourselves. I know so funny, Mark Twain. John, [Unclear] [1:10:09.9] when I was 12 years old, my old man was so stupid, I could hardly stand to be around him. And then when I turned 20 years old, it was amazing how intelligent he had become in eight years. That's because he did not value his father. He thought he was just old and out of touch and out of time, but you will find that your parents and your grandparents, just like when you were, you know, 25 or 26, years old, and knew everything or dare I say when you were a teenager and you really knew everything. You know, you find out that you don't know everything and that you could benefit from listening and talking with your elders. And given a healthy respect. I don't know if they wanted to ask them give Q&A or not. But I see Robin had to leave, so I have no place to look. I can keep talking, but I think I've said enough.

Okay, if you want me to keep talking. I'm a trial lawyer. I can run my mouth. Before we do that, can I invite John to just say a word about access to the legal Professor. John (Karvik), I want to welcome you to the Crump College of Law.

*John Karvik:* Wow, this is an honor. I knew Ben when he was a young lawyer. And I thought he kept talking to me about the, respecting ageism. And thank you. But I'll be brief. I'm very, very proud to be here at the Crump College of Law, that's a long time coming. It's only the second law school in the United States named after a black lawyer. And the other one wasn't too bad either. And I like your challenge. I will just say one thing. And I'll try to be quick. I've tried for the last 30 or 40 years in South Florida to open up access in the legal community, especially the black lawyers, because I respected my mother like you the respect to your grandmother. And she was a civil rights leader in St. Louis, which is very segregated, meanly segregated. And all the black students here at St. Thomas Benjamin L Crump law school have an opportunity between now and Monday to fill out an application for a summer fellowship, we're giving out at least \$5,000 to at-least 11 people. And so far, last year, we had 100 applications this year, we only have 35. And that's ridiculous. So, you can get 5000 bucks if you just fill out an application. And so, and this is one of our supporters, and I'm proud of him. So, thank you for inviting me up. And congratulations. I'm just so touched.

*Benjamin L. Crump:* So, we're open it up for questions and answers, any questions lawyers? Yes, ma'am.

*Audience:* Hi, how are you?

*Benjamin L. Crump:* I'm good. Good morning.

*Audience:* Good morning. My name is [Unclear] [1:14:22.1]. an honor to meet you today. And to have your name grace our walls, I did want to ask you how important you think intersectionality at that table matters.

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*Benjamin L. Crump:* I think is critical. I think that you have to have people who have different perspectives. If you don't have people who have different perspectives, then you're losing out. It is that simple. I want people who I may never ever have thought of their perspective. But had they been at that table and, so I think you have to have open arms welcome everybody to that table and say we're going to learn from you your opinion is just as valuable as my opinion, your walk of life is just as valuable as my walk of life. Yeah, Good morning.

That's a great question your name? Angelica. You know, one of the things I would say is if you don't know it, when you become a lawyer, you better get a mentor a quick. Somebody who is going to kind of have your back per se, but more importantly show you the ropes. There are certain things you would never learn in law school day that for you learn quick by going in that courtroom. And I don't know if they sometimes Teach judges this, but judges like taking less lawyers down a peg. As a smart Law Review lawyers and Moot Court lawyers, they want to put you in your place quick and say, hey, right now, this is my courtroom. And I want you to understand how we do things here, not just theoretical law, but how we do things in reality.

And so, Angelica, that would be the thing that I would implore you all to do, make sure you have a mentor and that mentor is accessible to you. And the beautiful thing about being young gal, is everybody wants to help you, you know, people want to help you. Now, I will tell you, as you get older, they start seeing you as a competition a little more. But while you're young, they want to help you. And I hope that we have people in our profession that are very secure within themselves, that I want to them to be like Irma Bombeck, who said, you know, when I die, and I'm before the pearly gates, I want to be able to tell God, I used all my talents that you gave me, every last one of them, to try to make a better world for the next people to follow me.

And hopefully, you have mentors like that. And that's how you get the access to them. And if you find that a mentor is, you know, busy and so forth, I wouldn't give up on him. But you can have multiple mentors, you know, people a reality is people are busy now. And you know, anybody who's ever dealt with me at all? First thing I say, when you call me it's talk quick. Yeah, I got like, give me the elevator pitch, I don't have time because we are busy. And then the other thing that I tell my staff, everybody who works with me, we have to imply models. You know, I got these offices all across the country we're doing all this work in is because we have a good team while we're able to do it.

But the two imply models at Ben Crump law firm is simply this. Number one, keep up, keep up. Well, I mean, anybody who works with me from first year associate to the people been with me over a decade, they know, it's like the gazelle and the cheetah. And you know, when you wake up in the morning, you better be running. Because that because they are if he wants to live, he better run. And that cheetah, if he wants to survive, they better be running. And so, we have that mindset that we're here for so much time to do as much as we can

make a greater impact we can before we hand the torch over to you all, and I look forward to handing the torch over to you all. And that's why I'm running so hard right now. And so, first thing is to keep up. And the second thing is everything is subject to change at a moment's notice. Can you imagine? Two and a half weeks ago, I had no idea that Tyre Nichols even existed. And for the last 10 days, is counter consumed everything that I have done.

Every day is being consumed, whether it's the White House calling, whether it's Senator Booker and them calling whether this the Memphis corporate leaders call us and we're worried that when the video comes out, there's going to be riots and all this. And so, it's subject to change. And that's a good metaphor for life because everything is subject to change. Even your most well laid plans are subject to change at a moment's notice.

So, you have to be adaptable. You have to be ready to roll with the punches as they say, and don't be afraid of change. Embrace it. Man, technology kick my butt every day. I just keep young smart people around me. I don't know nothing about social media. I don't know. I got like, they say like two and a half million people following me on social media. I can tell you I'm a little embarrassed by that. I can't tell you what I posted yesterday on Sunday, but I know I'm going get a lot of people talking to him about I agree with you to try to cover their face. So, did I got to go learn from them, what did we post and what did we post and with respect, but that's the way you got to keep young smart people around you one or two more.