

Speech

Mayor Joseph P. Riley, Jr.

January 5, 2016

Forty years ago the citizens of Charleston gave me the great honor and opportunity to serve them as your Mayor. Tonight, I wish to thank them and all of you who have allowed me this extended opportunity to serve you, and I wish to thank you for your exemplary citizenship that has allowed this city to become a finer, more just, beautiful and livable city.

The job of Mayor is a very personal one in that the responsibilities are not abstract or theoretical, but rather direct, specific and intimate – the responsibility for your and your children’s safety at home, at work, on the streets, for your neighborhood parks to be safe, beautiful and active for your and your children’s play, for your garbage and trash to be neatly collected, your neighborhoods peaceful and tidy, an economy bustling to benefit your livelihood, a city growing in fiscal strength and fairness, the inspiration of the arts accessible to all, lovely and positive civic spaces, your reasoned optimism for your future, and serve you in times of crises and so much more. In attending to those and other responsibilities, I have had the opportunity to hear from you – your letters, emails, phone calls, at City Council meetings, meetings in my office, Mayor’s Night In as I had this evening, neighborhood association meetings, civic organizations, or coming out of the grocery store or church, walking down the street and so many other encounters. In this process, a most wonderful thing happened to me. Through those thousands of ways of communicating, I got to know you, feel and appreciate your goodness and get to understand your hearts’ wishes – and that has been a priceless treasure. It has inspired me to work harder, to do more and do it better, and to never give up. So in the totality of my work, it never became remote, was never a statistic or poll number, but was always personal, the happiness and wellbeing of each and every citizen.

Through all of our encounters and communications, I also got to know your hearts; that is, what you would find most fulfilling, what would enrich your lives and the lives of your children, what would make you happy and proud of your city.

And then together we undertook to turn those aspirations into reality. Whether it was seeking to make our city more just and welcoming for our African American brothers and sisters and achieving their full participation in our government and community or whether it was making our city safer and more livable, restoring downtown, building Waterfront Park, West Ashley Park, over 80 other parks, the new Gaillard, the Aquarium, or the baseball park. Whether it was creating Spoleto, Moja or a host of other popular events. Whether it was being named the world’s most desirable destination. Or whether it was attracting new, better jobs and creating the Digital Corridor.

These achievements we accomplished together. Many became embroiled in controversy. But what kept me going, pushing, having the resolve not to give up was that I had gotten to know your hearts, and I knew that if the goal was achieved, the project or initiative completed, your hearts would be fulfilled and it would make you happy and proud to be a citizen of Charleston.

Of course you did so much more. You gave of yourselves in countless initiatives. For a city in a democracy has the wonderful opportunity for citizens to form partnerships, create new institutions and programs, care for the poor and homeless, enhance our children’s education, protect open lands forever, strengthen health clinics and empower neighborhoods, assist senior citizens, mentor children and much more. As Alexis de Tocqueville, the French writer who

studied America in the early 19th century observed, the freedom of a democracy does not produce a selfish people but rather enhances the natural human instinct to be generous and help others. I could count hundreds of initiatives that you, the good people of our community, instituted and maintained and I loved the honor of supporting you as you made our community a fine and more just place to call home. That is why it is such an honor to serve you, to have a front row seat on so many beautiful acts of goodness and service.

Tonight is not the time of litanies of professed achievements – that is for history to judge. And all the achievements were not mine – rather they were yours and the 17,000 hardworking city employees over the 40 years and the 48 colleagues on City Council – I accomplished nothing alone. Nor is this a time to list projects and initiatives for the future – that is for our fine new mayor John Tecklenburg and City Council. Rather, I would like to conclude with these three thoughts for our city and its future.

First, we must always be guided by the standard of excellence. That is, we have the responsibility to seek excellence in everything we do. Medium is beneath the goodness and quality of the citizens of our city. We must look well into the future and ask ourselves if what we are considering will be deemed excellent in 25, 50 or even 100 years from now. This is ever more important in a time of robust economic growth. It is easy to accept mediocrity. It is hard to demand excellence but that is what this great city and its citizens deserve. As the Athenian Oath states, we have a duty to leave our city not only as beautiful, but more beautiful than we found it.

Second, the long march for racial understanding and justice is not finished as we were heartbreakingly reminded on June the 17, 2015. The International African American Museum is a solemn duty and profound opportunity for this city and our country. It will be an inspirational source of pride for every citizen. It may prove to be our most important building. But in addition to that we must do more and work harder to better understand, love, care for and respect each other.

Third, we are at the dawn of a new age that is confronted with the recognized ability to harm or heal our planet. It is every citizen's duty to heal and protect. As the old African proverb states, we did not inherit our land from our ancestors, we hold it in trust for future generations.

In a few days, for the last time I will repeat a practice of forty years. At the end of the day, I will turn off the lights in my office and in this building, walk down the steps, lock the door and go to the warmth, love and integrity of my wife, our family and our home. But even though my time in this office and serving you will be over, the memories will never leave me, they will nourish me every day of my life. Thank you – good night.