

UCS 21st Annual Black History Month Celebration **Feb. 24, 2011**

Good evening everyone. I'm sorry that an out-of-town commitment prevents me from being with you in person. I want to start by thanking Barry Clarke, Tony Walters and the Committee to Celebrate Black History Month for organizing tonight's festivities, and for giving me this opportunity to send you my greetings.

I can still vividly remember the first time we talked about having a Black History Month Celebration, and now here we are celebrating our 21st. I am very proud of this special tradition, graced always with renowned and inspirational speakers, like tonight's supremely accomplished keynote speaker, Dr. William F. Kuntz II.

This is an evening to take pride in the progress that African Americans have made in our country, our state, and our very own Unified Court System. But it's also an occasion to consider how we can do better, and to redouble our commitment to promoting diversity.

Two weeks ago, I spoke at a program for law school admissions officers at the Judicial Institute and reminded them that law schools are the gatekeepers of our profession and the traditional training ground for our

nation's leaders. In my talk, I referred to a New York Times article from last year reporting that even though 3000 new law school seats were added nationwide between 1993 and 2008, both the percentage and total number of African-American law students declined over that period, even though their GPAs and LSAT scores actually went up. Of the 46,500 students matriculated in law school in the fall of 2008, only 7.3% were African Americans. That's not good enough. We are all challenged to do better.

For several years, the New York state court system has been running a wonderful program called the New York Legal Education Opportunity Program – LEO -- which is open, free of charge, to minority, low-income or educationally disadvantaged students who have an application pending at a New York law school. Under the leadership of Dean Juanita Bing Newton, and with the help of the faculty at Pace Law School, we give the LEO Fellows a realistic preview of the rigorous classroom experience they will encounter in law school. We balance the academics with real-life exposure to Judges and lawyers and court proceedings -- from the New York City Criminal Court to the New York Court of Appeals in Albany.

The track record has been superb – 76 students have come through this program, and 71 have either graduated or are successfully enrolled in

law school, including 39 Fellows of African-American and West Indian descent. Our Fellows have attended virtually every law school in the State, including Columbia, Cornell and NYU. The legal profession and our entire society benefits when we give aspiring minority lawyers the opportunity to pursue their dreams and follow in the footsteps of great lawyers and judges like William Kuntz, George Bundy Smith, Carmen Beauchamp Ciparick, Ted Jones, and so many others.

I want to thank those of you who are doing so much to help these young people through scholarships, internships, mentoring programs, and outreach and recruitment efforts. We all owe a debt of gratitude to the Franklin H. Williams Commission on Minorities; the Tribune Society; the Judicial Friends, and to every single one of you committed to this cause.

Before I close, I want to recognize someone who has devoted his career to the courts with great competence and dedication. Bill Etheridge did a magnificent job for so many years of overseeing the operations and personnel of the New York City Criminal Court -- one of the busiest criminal courts in the world. Bill, on behalf of the entire Judiciary, I want to thank you for all you have done as an advocate for equal opportunity and as a role model and mentor. You have made our court system a better place.

We're all so fortunate to be working in the judicial system with people

like Bill Etheridge. As the branch of government that renders justice, we have a special obligation to be a model of fairness in everything we do. And I am so pleased in my professional life to have played a role, alongside all of you, in bringing New York's court system to where it is today – reflecting the richness and diversity of our great state. I look forward to continuing to work with all of you to build on the progress we have made.

Thank you again, and I hope you enjoy the rest of your evening!