Many thanks to God for allowing me the opportunity to be here today. I also, want to thank Dr. Henry Evans and the Diversity Resource Center for seeing something in me that I should be here as the keynote speaker for the Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration at Idaho State University this year of 2019.

As I speak today, I want to acknowledge that I am standing here, but that my ancestors were able to make this possible for me. So, I am not doing this alone. I’m doing this with my village that includes my loved ones who are my parents from both Cameroon and the United States (southeast Washington DC and beyond), siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, and 4.5 god-children that are here in spirit along with my department and Idaho community able to be here today.

If you are here today and we have had a conversation, can you please raise your hand or stand?

I’d like to thank you for being a part of my village, your words have played a role in my growth while being here.

BREATHE

When first asked of this great opportunity last December, I was eager to speak, but that continued to change as time moved on. Before leaving for the holiday break, I planned to write the speech over the break. But fear crept in and I started to wonder if I was the right person for the job. I am not a person among loved ones or within my community to be soft spoken or a sugar coater. So, I questioned myself heavily. But, I continued to have these signs happen that let me know that this was something that I was supposed to do; it was this underlying sense of ease and confidence that I would get the job done. For me, it was God standing with me.

Though, I had questions come to mind like “could I be excommunicated after doing this?” or “would I be banned from BBQs or picnics in Idaho”? The latter, I was actually cool with as historically, these were events that people like me did not want to attend as the term is not culturally sensitive. But, I kept getting invited to them. Please note that satire and humor are among my coping mechanisms and it’s how I am able to make it in this world as I move between white and colored spaces on a daily.

An example of a white space for me would be going to a swim meet where all the professional swimmers are Black and there is one White professional swimmer that has
to compete. It sounds uncomfortable, right? But, reverse this to understand my experience.

**BREATHE**

In mentioning this spiel, I want to mention that this is my experience and my perspective. This is not to shut anyone else down or make anyone feel small; I apologize in advance if that is experienced, but some bits of my experience while here these semesters have not been the sunniest and this is coming from an optimistic Black woman. Even as I consider my optimism, I wonder if that’s doubted while here because there’s this role that a Black woman faces that perpetuates continued anger and the stereotypic phrase being an “angry Black woman”. Or that a Black woman can only have the identity of patting her weave or swaying her neck. I do both and there is nothing wrong with that, but I want to let you know that I have more levels to my existence as well.

Before Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. left this Earth, he actually pushed to have tougher conversations that spoke out against racism, poverty and other topics that people did not like here in America. Cornell West wrote about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and mentioned that before he died, he actually was shunned and turned away by many people.

*So, as a way to ease my anxiety in sharing and to ward off the isolating feeling that could happen from this level of vulnerability, I’d like to ask that if anyone here resonates with anything that I say today to raise their hand in silence or even stand to let me know that you are with me.*

Because if you are not aware so far, it looks like you’ll be getting a mental tour of what it’s like for this Black woman to be in Idaho. I acknowledge that this message may not reach everyone, but that this is something that is true to me. I am also, aware that people receive messages at different speeds, so I am just planting seeds and the rest is up to the people who come into this space after me. My hope is that this speech will start a conversation that needs to be had for our community to grow into a safer space for everyone. People should be able to say Idahome no matter the circumstance.

**BREATHE**

With that being said, I believe that there is strength in unity and diversity per the Diversity Resource Center’s theme because it brings comfort, allowing me to believe that me, a Black woman of many intersects from southeast Washington DC can become more and do more for our community here in Idaho. I speak of intersects as in intersectionality that acknowledges that a person like me can exist with different
elements of privilege and marginalization. I identify as a Black woman before anything because I am aware that before my name or speech is presented, my Blackness could never be ignored.

I want to do a small demonstration of privilege and marginalization. Before we begin, I want to give the definition of privilege and marginalization.

- A privilege is a special right or advantage given to a particular person or group.
- Marginalization or someone being marginalized is when someone whether (a group, person or concept) is put or kept in an unimportant or lower position.
- Intersectionality is going to mean that an individual can be privileged and marginalized at the same time. For example, I am a Black (marginalized race) woman (marginalized gender) who gets to go to school (a privilege).

Directions: after I read a prompt, you’re going to either stand or raise your hand and sit down or put a thumb sign down depending on if the prompt applies to you.

Let’s practice, “if you are right handed, please stand or raise your hand”.

Now let’s start...
1. If you can find Band-aids at mainstream stores designed to blend in with or match your skin tone, raise your hand or stand.
2. If one or both of your parents have a college degree, take one step forward.
3. If you were ever uncomfortable about a joke related to your race, religion, ethnicity, gender, disability, or sexual orientation but felt unsafe to confront the situation, sit down or put a thumb sign down.
4. If you can make mistakes and not have people attribute your behavior to flaws in your racial or gender group, raise your hand or stand.
5. If you ever had to skip a meal or were hungry because there was not enough money to buy food, sit down or put a thumb sign down.
6. If you were ever made fun of or bullied for something you could not change or was beyond your control, sit down or put a thumb sign down.
7. If you have an invisible or visible disability, sit down or put a thumb sign down.
8. If you would never think twice about calling the police when trouble occurs, raise your hand or stand up.

Would anyone like to share how it felt to participate in this activity? Would anyone in the audience like to share how it felt to witness the activity?

I want to thank everyone who participated in the activity.
At this point, if anyone is wondering why I have not mentioned my status in education, it is because I put status on a lower pedestal and value how someone treats someone over their level of success. In fact, a lot of people I have met here in Idaho were not introduced immediately to my status whether educationally or professionally. I recognize that I am in the process of achieving privilege for the future generations of my family, but that does not put me above any human being.

In the moments where I do share about my education, it is not to throw it at someone, but to go against the stigma that Black people are uneducated when stereotyped about my appearance or to inspire someone to push for their goals no matter the circumstances.

I visited Idaho in January 2018 for an interview that would change my life after carefully applying to programs. I heard great stories about the department, but remember wondering if they were really open to conversations about inclusion and culture where I could feel safe as a Black woman in Idaho. A year later, I can honestly say that I have come to value many of my faculty because they have provided a safe environment for me where I can feel heard as one of the only Black women on our floor. That safe environment takes continued work from myself, my peers both of and outside the African diaspora and our faculty. It is not easy, but has been a worthwhile experience thus far.

In August 2018, I checked in two large luggage at the airport. I sold or gave away all of my belongings, left my car with my family and walked with faith.

I walked everywhere when I first got here, but I had to walk to learn the community and to create a community or safe space outside of my department. I noticed that my eagerness in creating that outside safe space caused me to become this extroverted Black woman. I walked up to a Black couple and eagerly introduced myself assuming that they were students in another program here. I even walked down the street in front of Reed Gym and met a bright Black woman who I instantly clicked with upon us complimenting each other’s hair.

One of my first prejudice events while here was actually on campus in Idaho. I walked cheerfully from class during my first month here and noticed someone seeking eye contact a few feet away. Her facial expression appeared different, I could not recognize or read her face as easily, but I figured it was because I was not from the area. As I got closer to her, I would later learn that she was actually giving a look of disgust and was wearing a confederate flag on her black hoodie. I consider that event a moment of prejudice because the girl had a preconceived notion that she should not like me and this was without even knowing who I was. I was able to talk through it with a friend and am sharing it to mention that there are things happening on our campus that need to be
addressed. A confederate flag symbolizes a form of hatred and a disregard for people of color that allows me to cringe every time I see one. I guess she considered me “out of place” because I had already been told twice that I was the first Black person that people had seen while here by some peers.

Something poignant that stands out to me is having to consider that I could be mistaken for an “out of place” person especially when I learned that our building’s lobby turned off the lights before my shift ended or even when I had to walk home on a barely lit street with a home that continues to host a confederate flag. Thankfully, I was able to talk to a peer here about the fear associated with that circumstance because talking about this circumstance helped fight off the fear. People of color and in my case, Black women of color have not been safe in the eyes of the police and I say this to honor, Sandra Bland and my late brother, Edward Lee Thomas IV, who were victims of unjust police brutality.

The air in some people resembles this tolerance that is missing a big piece of the definition of acceptance and connecting where people appear to think that making eye contact is enough and a simple greeting or gesture would be too much. For example, I have made eye contact with people here and maybe even raised my hand to wave after 10 seconds to have the eye contact remain with a look of disregard. Or I have watched facial expressions of awe on campus while buying food with peers that appear that I cannot be an intelligent and confident Black woman.

Some of my later circumstances would include being turned away at an empty nail salon in Pocatello or having to think twice when banging on a door for over 20 minutes to enter a house late at night while in Boise due to this being an open carry state and my awareness that as a Black woman, I could have been seen as breaking and entering.

I guess I have been breaking and entering for some time while working to achieve my education. I face a constant battle in class to speak up as I realize every class that I am the only Black woman in my department. It can be an isolating experience, but for me, it’s acknowledging that the space was not necessarily created for me and I have this inherited job to expand that space for other Black women after me. Education is a privilege that potentially not many in my lineage have achieved. I look around and I see an ascribed privilege for some of my peers that many from marginalized populations are fighting to achieve. I mention that privilege to be ascribed because it was something given, something that they never questioned would not be in their possession. Less than 100 years ago, people like me within the United States were afforded the opportunity to go to school in a white space. I thank the living Ruby Bridges who is the first African American student that integrated an elementary school in the South in 1960.
After hearing of my experiences, I wonder if anyone here is wondering, “how are you still here?” I’m at a place in my life where I can handle the pressure. I will say that it took work to be able to cope and tactfully advocate. If you’d met me years ago during an experience in Paris where I was followed around for almost 30 minutes in a clothing store; I might not have been able to handle the pressure as well and my energy might have been different.

And I want to mention that I have met some pretty great people here that continue to support me. One of the people that stand out to me is Pastor Jacqueline Theresa Thomas of Praise Temple of God, who I get to talk to on a weekly basis. I say I get to talk to her because she is an amazing Black woman doing so much for the community and somehow she finds time to check in about my day to make me feel valued. She is the owner of Big Momma’s House that is fighting to provide housing and different resources for people in need.

I have also, witnessed glimmers in hope where I have been able to have peers look out for me. For instance, I went to Walmart with a peer and there were looks of disregard, but my friend readily stood at my side, ready to stick up for me.

I would like to thank my peers who were able to provide their perspectives on community building, this year’s celebration theme and the diversity resource center’s theme. I had a funny time trying to get perspectives for the survey because many of my peers thought I was selling them something or getting them to join a pyramid company.

I picked the brains of peers on the east coast, got help in gaining perspectives from peers here and on the west coast. This year’s celebration theme is “Reinvigorating The Beloved Community” and peers in Idaho spoke to the community needing work and something to spark it which was also, mentioned from peers outside of Idaho. It looks like community building takes continued work to maintain unity. One response that stood out to me about the Diversity Resource Center’s Theme of “There is Strength in Unity and Diversity” surrounded the idea that people would be stronger if privileged and marginalized populations worked together. In reading that response, I thought of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s vision within his “I Have a Dream” speech.

I continue to wonder what was going on in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s mind when he gave that speech and I continue to think about his takeaways because he spoke about our potential as a community. I want to let you know that I thought heavily on the takeaways of my message and I have some helpful tips to consider when I consider opportunities to add more seasoning or to reinvigorate the beloved community. I mentioning seasoning because I imagine that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Mrs. Coretta Scott King both appreciated a nicely cooked meal being from Georgia and
Alabama. I have yet to visit Georgia, but the food in Alabama is definitely worth another visit. Many that know me are aware that the small things matter most to me and that food is a way to my heart.

But, let’s get back to these helpful tips that have gotten me this far and allowed me to build my own community while here in Idaho because I can talk about food for hours.

1. **Heal and practice self-care.** Believe it or not, but it’s really hard to love someone when you don’t have that same love for yourself. Many of us are facing battles that no one knows about on a daily. Not taking care of yourself could be keeping you from connecting with others in need. Not taking care of yourself could be affecting your relationships.

2. **Look for more ways than verbal to understand people.** English is not the dominant language of this world. Language is 90% body language, we don’t just communicate with our words. Forcing a person to speak your language is similar to forcing your culture on someone and that’s not okay. Also, consider that certain phrases used may mean one thing for your area and something completely different in another area.

   For example, the phrase “What’s up?” with the wrong tone could potentially start a fight and that’s not something that we want to happen in our community. I had this happen in our campus bookstore where I was initially told to drop my bag at the front and had it repeated in a offensive tone. Once I did it, I was then, asked “What’s up?” without a smile, but a look of disregard. I think about the feeling in the moment and I hurt the most, hearing how every other person was regarded who walked in the bookstore. But, I was able to speak up for myself to speak towards the customer service and disregard for me.

3. **Not saying anything to help someone in trouble is a stance.** It might even be an agreement in some circumstances. Stand up for others while scared if you have to because those are the moments that help the future of our community and those moments also, help members of our community feel valued.

   In 1958, Dr. Martin Luther King held a book signing in Harlem. He was stabbed by Izola Curry, a Black woman who faced mental battles. She was about to be sentenced to life or maybe worse. But, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was able to stand up for Izola Curry. If Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had not spoke in her defense, she would have been sentenced without mental consideration. Dr.
Martin Luther King, Jr was able to stand up for her and help get her the help that she needed.

4. **Allow people to tell their own stories.** Listening is a way to make people feel valued and appreciated. But also, consider sharing your own stories to build the bond, always listening and never sharing can be uncomfortable for people. Try to push away from this notion to say, “I know exactly how you feel” because you don’t, that person has their own feelings and takes on the world different from you. Furthermore, try not to use the stories you’ve heard from those people as a story for that population. I say this because I had a peer from Idaho recently tell me that racism did not exist in Idaho because the peer had a black female friend who had a brother, who traveled all over Idaho and they never experienced racism. And that was not okay.

My hope is that my sharing today will inspire others to share about their stories. I am a strong Black woman, but this is for people who did not feel strong before I spoke today.

My hope is that others will speak in fear as I did today because I’ve come too far to be quiet about circumstances that could be eating others alive. This message is for the people that are facing battles that we know nothing about whether in a classroom or in a public restroom.

Thank you for listening to me today.