

## Philadelphia mayor sees hope for urban America

1:37 p.m., March 13, 2009----Philadelphia Mayor Michael A. Nutter told a University of Delaware audience that despite the challenges brought on by the current economic crisis, now is the best of times to be involved in public service.

Nutter made his remarks to an audience of about 250 students, faculty, staff and members of the community while discussing "The Obama Presidency and Urban America: Hopes and Challenges," during the annual Louis L. Redding Diversity Lecture, held Thursday, March 12, in the Trabant University Center Theatre.

Sponsored by the UD Office of Affirmative Action and Multicultural Programs, the lecture honors the late attorney Louis Lorenzo Redding for his efforts in the advancement of civil rights in Delaware and in the United States. Redding was the first African-American to be admitted to the Delaware Bar.

Before describing his own entry and involvement in public service, Nutter told the audience that although Louis Redding "left us more than 10 years ago, his work to end the evil of discrimination has never ended, and continues to live on, not only on this campus, but across this city and across our nation."

"He is truly a great champion and a person to be admired," Nutter said. "It is truly an honor to have my name mentioned at the same time as Louis Redding, and I want to thank you for this wonderful honor."

A lifetime resident of the City of Brotherly Love, Nutter said service to others was part of the culture in which he grew up and was instilled in him by his parents and the example of others in the community.

"I believe in the goodness of people and in the life-fulfilling value of serving them," Nutter said. "It's the right thing to do, but it has always been about more than that for me."

Nutter said that it was not unusual for his father to ask him to shovel not only his own steps and the sidewalk of the family row home, but also to do the same for the other homes all the way to the corner.

"There were a number of seniors and others who could not take care of themselves and could never, ever accept a dime from anyone," Nutter said. "That was a part of service, and that was a part of commitment, where we looked out for each other, and had a sense that we really are our brothers' and sisters' keepers."

Nutter said that he lived in a generation in which people were taught that if you were on a SEPTA bus and a senior citizen, woman or man, got on, you gave up your seat to that person.

"That was just part of my upbringing," Nutter said. "Service became a part of the expectation of who I was and what I was about. I guess it is not a big surprise that I was somehow, some way, attracted to public service."

Although the notion of service through public office had not entered Nutter's mind as a young person, he eventually began to get involved in politics at about the same time as a number of major cities were electing their first African American mayors.

"The early 1980s in African American politics saw the rise of a different group of politicians, not just in Philadelphia with Wilson Goode, but you had [David] Dinkins in New York City, [Tom] Bradley in Los Angeles, and [Harold] Washington, in Chicago," Nutter said. "I am the third African American mayor of Philadelphia in this post civil rights era, and I tell you that for many of us, the election of Barack Obama as president was a new opportunity to be engaged in the civil rights movement."

Part of this enthusiasm, Nutter said, results from the fact that the administration of President Obama has made restoring hope and economic vitality in urban America a top government priority.

"Tonight, I want to talk about cities in America, and the opportunities that the Obama administration has to energize our country's economy," Nutter said. "Not to be political, but quite honestly, after eight years of complete neglect from Washington, D.C., metropolitan areas are seeing an uptick, and people are hopeful because of the great work and the interest that the Obama administration is now showing to realign federal resources all across America to our cities and metropolitan areas in ways that we have not seen for a long, long period of time."

While Philadelphia is a diverse city, it faces significant social and economic challenges, Nutter said.

"There is one statistic that pretty much overwhelms all the others -- that Philadelphia has a poverty rate of about 24 percent," Nutter said. "One of four Philadelphians lives in poverty. That is our greatest challenge."

Nutter said he believes it requires the resources of the federal government in combination with leadership on the local level to meet such a challenge.

"When I was sworn in last January, I made education the centerpiece of our administration," Nutter said. "We are facing a 40 percent high school dropout rate, and I pledged to cut that in half over the course of the next five to seven years. I also said that we would reduce our homicide rate by 30 to 50 percent, with a 10 percent



*Philadelphia Mayor Michael A. Nutter addresses a UD audience Thursday.*

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drop each year."

Last year, Nutter said, the city experienced a 15 percent drop in homicides, as well as an 11 percent drop in shootings, while graduation rates inched upwards.

While education and crime are significant issues, the greatest challenge may be steadily increasing budget deficits facing all urban centers as a result of one of the worst economic situations faced by leaders at all levels of government in many years, Nutter said.

"On Nov. 6, 2008, just two days after the most historical election in recent times, I announced that we had a budget deficit of over \$1 billion for the next five years," Nutter said. "Next Thursday (March 19), I will introduce our fiscal year 2010 budget and corresponding five-year plan. It is tough to close a second \$1 billion deficit."

While President Obama's economic recovery plan will not fill the budget gaps experienced by cities across the nation, Nutter said those dollars will help put people back to work.

"The president has insisted that we spend the money wisely and in a timely fashion," Nutter said. "We are going to do just that. We are going to put a bunch of Philadelphians back to work. Americans are going to go back to work all across the country."

Nutter also praised the efforts of John Byrne, director of UD's Center for Energy and Environmental Policy and a member of the Nobel Peace Prize-winning Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, for his work with the Delaware Sustainable Energy Utility program.

"We recognize great ideas, and we are using John's ideas in our own energy utility right now," Nutter said. "While we know that green jobs are not a panacea, a green job beats a pink slip any day of the week."

Putting people back to work and adopting a Earth-friendly approach to sustainability issues represents part of the needed changes that must be made at all levels of government, Nutter said.

"I'm very excited about working with the Obama administration. Their view on how to sustain and create a more vibrant urban American is a wonderful opportunity," Nutter said. "Change is the way of the future, and while that will mean different things to different people, I think the one thing it means is that we can't keep doing what we have been doing and survive."

Nutter said that despite instability and concern during this time of economic crisis, he still believes it is a good time for Americans to heed President Obama's call for public service.

"This is an incredible moment in American history," Nutter said. "We should not let it pass without making things better for ourselves, for our children, the future and for the United States of America."

Article by Jerry Rhodes  
Photo by Kevin Quinlan