

**Public Lawyer of the Year Award Speech
State Bar of California Annual Meeting
Oct. 9, 2015
Anaheim Marriott Hotel, Anaheim, CA**

Good afternoon!

Thank you Madam Chief Justice Cantil Sakauye for that lovely introduction and presentation.

And thank you from the bottom of my heart to the State Bar Public Law Section Executive Committee for this wonderful award.

It is a true honor and an inspiration. I am inspired to work even harder to make sure I live up to the high expectations you have set for me with this honor.

Any success I have is because of the dedication of the attorneys and support staff in my office. Without their hard work and creativity and professionalism, I would not be here accepting this award. So I humbly accept not just on my own behalf, but on behalf of the entire Oakland City Attorney's Office.

I also accept this award on behalf of my parents, James Parker Senior and Savannah Parker, who have departed this realm. I wish they could be here today. Their extraordinary sacrifice, their love and teachings, their hard work, the values and goals they instilled in me and my siblings, have guided me, and continue to inspire and motivate me every day to do my best to secure equal opportunity, justice and a level playing field for all.

I also want to recognize all of the talented and inspiring public lawyers out there. I realize that any of the many talented and accomplished public attorneys in California, some of whom are in this room today, could be standing up here receiving this award. So I also accept this award on behalf of all the public lawyers of California, without whom our cities and counties and our state literally could not function.

Last, but not least, I must acknowledge my family, extended family and dear friends who came today: 1) My daughter Savannah and my grandson Samuel Koda, 2) my cousin Jenea Levy, her husband Robert and their son Jaylen from the Fresno area, 3) my sister-in-law, Sylvia Spearman from Seattle, 4) my cousin Joyce Jamison and her husband David from Maryland; (5) dear friends, Barbara Dean, Diane Lewis, Michelle and Daniel Kenyon and their daughter, Arianna Kenyon and 6) representatives of my Occidental College ("Oxy") family: Sheila Wills, my college roommate and my law school roommate Donna Wills Williams and her husband Tim, who live in the Los Angeles area. I met them 49 years ago when I was an 18-year-old college freshman.

Thank you all for joining me here today.

During my nearly 40-year law career, I have practiced in the private sector for law firms and corporations and at every level of government. But my calling and my life's work is as a public attorney. I want to talk briefly about how I came to this profession and about what I consider to be the great calling of public attorneys.

I am the proud product of my parents' experiences, and my own experiences as a child, in rural, segregated Arkansas and my hometown Seattle.

For some of the younger people who are here today, legalized segregation and discrimination may seem like ancient history. But some of us here grew up when segregation and discrimination were the law of the land.

As a child I was exposed to Jim Crow when my family spent summers with my grandparents in Arkansas. One pivotal moment etched in my memory is my grandmother literally snatching me off the sidewalk in downtown El Dorado, Arkansas. When I asked her why, she said "white folks are coming." I was six years old and didn't understand: I replied, "Yes, I see them."

Born in the early 1920s, my mother was a sharecropper and my father was a poor farmer. They moved to Seattle, where I was born and raised, to seek a better life as part of the Great Migration Isabel Wilkerson so beautifully chronicled in her book "The Warmth of Other Suns."

Seattle was better than the Deep South, but it was not free from the deep-rooted and open white supremacy that was a defining trait of our country at that time. The downtown Woolworth's department store had a segregated lunch counter. Everyone knew about it, but my parents never acknowledged it was segregated. They just said you don't want to eat at the Woolworth's lunch counter; the food isn't any good. Inspired by the civil rights sit-ins, when I was 12, my friends and I staged a sit-in at that lunch counter. The waiters refused to serve us, ignoring us and refusing to even acknowledge that we were there.

I didn't plan to be a lawyer; I just knew I wanted to change our country. As a child I had no idea that a career as a lawyer was a possibility for me. My siblings and I are the first generation in the history of our family to go to college. My father told me and my three siblings, for as long as I can remember, that we would go to college; and he told me I would be a teacher, a nurse or, if all else failed, an executive secretary. These were the top careers for women at the time. In fact, my Occidental college friend, Brenda Shockley, who could not be here today, was the first African American college student that I knew who was planning to go to law school. She opened my eyes to the possibility of a legal career. Based on my experience and my parents' teachings, I viewed the law as a tool to better our community and the world, not as a theoretical exercise.

I was one of a very small number of African American women that Harvard Law School admitted in the early 1970s. Harvard was not exactly a welcoming place for me as a woman or African American. During my first few weeks at the Law School,

a group of male students came to my dormitory and told me I should withdraw because I was taking a spot that should be filled by a man. Of course, I showed them the door and didn't quit.

In 1975 I graduated and began my career in the vibrant Oakland-San Francisco Bay Area.

I want to provide some brief highlights that I am proud of during my four-year tenure as City Attorney.

- I sponsored and co-authored a comprehensive government ethics law that the City Council adopted this year.
- We recently filed a lawsuit against Wells Fargo, the nation's largest mortgage lender, for predatory and racially discriminatory lending practices.
- We brought a lawsuit against JPMorgan and other banks for antitrust violations in municipal derivatives. To date we have secured more than a million dollars in settlements and the lawsuit continues against a number of other institutions. And we have brought other actions against major banks and financial institutions for antitrust violations.
- We shut down two Oakland hotels that were centers for prostitution and the sexual exploitation of minors.
- We won a record \$15 million judgment in a lawsuit against a fraudulent immigration consultant that preyed upon Oakland immigrant families. It is the largest judgment the City of Oakland has ever won, and the largest amount ever awarded under the state statute.
- We launched a crackdown on illegal dumping, which is an epidemic in Oakland, recovering thousands of dollars in fines from illegal dumpers.
- We are in federal court right now suing the US Attorney and US Attorney General to uphold Oakland's right to regulate and license medical cannabis.

After almost a lifetime of practicing public law and reaching the mature age of 67, I have witnessed the progress our country and our legal system have made. I also am painfully aware of how tragically we have fallen short of our promise.

The legal segregation that drove my parents and countless other African American families to the North ended because of changes in the law – changes made possible by public lawyers, civil rights attorneys and activists. But we still have a long way to go to achieve equality in our legal system.

Some searing examples:

- Between 1980 and 2008, the number of people incarcerated in America quadrupled, from about 500,000 to 2.3 million.

- Much of this expansion has been focused – in a massively unequal way – on African Americans.
- African Americans now make up about 1 million of the 2.3 million prisoners. We are incarcerated at nearly six times the rate of whites.
- If this trend continues, one in three Black men born today will be incarcerated at some point in their lives.
- This is not because African Americans commit crimes at a higher rate than whites.
- African Americans represent 12% of the total population of drug users, but 38% of those arrested for non-violent drug offenses, and 59% of those in state prison for a non-violent drug offense.
- African Americans serve virtually as much time in prison for a non-violent drug offense (58.7 months) as whites do for a violent offense (61.7 months).
- Why is this? We know that African American communities are subject to more aggressive policing and higher uses of force.
- Sentences are harsher for the same crimes.
- The Death penalty is applied unfairly to African American defendants.
- The statistics go on and on.

In reality, segregation is not over.

Mass incarceration, aggressive policing that is almost exclusively focused on communities of color and a fundamentally un-level playing field are today's Jim Crow.

Despite the Civil Rights Acts and the Voting Rights Act (which is being dismantled as we speak), and so many other accomplishments, we still have separate and unequal legal systems for African American and white citizens.

This is our great challenge for this century and I believe our calling as public attorneys. We are often the force that bends the arc of history towards justice.

In Oakland we have been working with the federal court to improve how we police the city.

In the cities and counties where we work, we advise and defend our clients. But as you all know, our jobs encompass much, much more than just the law.

We help shape policies, decisions and agendas of the legislators and executives of our towns and counties and agencies and in our state and federal governments.

Our jobs are often behind the scenes but I believe they often are the most important and influential positions in government.

We have to make sure our level of responsibility matches the level of influence we wield.