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Beyond Ferguson: Empowering Low-Income People to Build the Future of Their Communities

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Introduction

This perspective was created from Dorothy Stoneman's address during a Center for Social Development 20th Anniversary event at Washington University in St. Louis on February 3, 2015. The Center for Social Development invited Dr. Stoneman to tell the story of YouthBuild and how it relates to the events of Ferguson.

Race and Class in the 21st Century

Good morning. I am honored and delighted to be here to join the important national dialogue about the implications of what happened here in Ferguson, Missouri, and in other communities, and what we can all do to improve the multifaceted underlying conditions that produced the crisis. Fortunately, many people are turning their attention to the issues of race and class in the 21st century.

The emerging dialogue must start with recognizing that millions of America's young people were born into poverty through no fault of their own. They were raised in poverty with enormous systemic obstacles and personal trauma to overcome. Innumerable young people have told me that they expected to be dead or in jail before age 25.

Realizing the Beloved Community

Currently, there are six million Latino, five million white, 4.8 million black, 500,000 Asian, and 300,000 Native American children being raised in poverty in America (Macartney, 2011). We must change this. In our heart of hearts, we know it is possible to create a society in which resources and opportunities are distributed so that all people can fulfill their potential and their noblest aspirations; where the dominant

values are respect, responsibility, love, and community; where we live in peace. We believe in the Beloved Community envisioned by Rev. Martin Luther King, a society in which all people can flourish and all lives matter, in which everyone can belong, care for their families, and contribute to something they believe in. We are here in this room today because we aim to make that Beloved Community a reality.

Across America, millions of people of all races, incomes, and backgrounds are angry. This anger is legitimate, but it is not enough to move us forward. Changing the reality we face depends on our acting consistently out of love, treating all people with respect, persuading our public and private leaders to make major public investments in diminishing poverty and injustice, and increasing educational and economic opportunity.

Realizing Dr. King's Beloved Community depends on all of us developing active interpersonal connections across all barriers of class, race, religion, and gender. It depends on our speaking up and creating contexts in which low-income people can present their ideas and solutions to people in power to get them implemented. People closest to the experience have some of the best ideas for change. It also depends on our creating pathways into power for people who understand these realities but are underrepresented and disenfranchised.

With this in mind, I am especially happy to welcome 100 YouthBuild students and graduates from St. Louis, Columbia, and Kansas City, Missouri; and from East St. Louis, Bloomington, Mt. Vernon, and Godfrey, Illinois. You have experienced in vivid and highly personal ways the impact of poverty in your lives and families, the importance of having law enforcement that is respectful and skillful to secure your safety, and the trauma that is produced when it is not.

Through YouthBuild, you have experienced the power of building a caring and safe minicommunity of opportunity and responsibility. I hope your trip here today will inspire you to take even greater responsibility toward leading and building the future of your communities. You have the knowledge and the will. With practice, you can develop the skill to make an indelible difference to the realities that surround you.

Privilege and Poverty in American Communities

I personally know what a community of opportunity feels like. I was raised in one. My great grandfather came to America in the late 1880s to escape the widespread murder of Jews in Russia. He found success in America by starting a small antique store. His children and grandchildren went to college and built careers consistent with the American dream. As a result, I grew up in a community that was safe and caring, with great schools, churches, sports teams, fields and woods where I could play freely, and Girl Scout troops that pledged to *help other people at all times*.

America has many such communities. Unfortunately, many are segregated by class and race. In the community of my childhood, only middle-class white people who could afford the high cost of housing and property taxes were welcome. When I learned in the early '60s as a college student about the struggles of black Americans—made known to ignorant northern whites like myself most dramatically through the Birmingham church bombings in 1963 when four little black girls were killed by the Ku Klux Klan—I joined the Civil Rights movement. I moved to Harlem, New York, where I lived and worked for 24 years.

Surrounded by abandoned dilapidated buildings, heroin, unemployment, and underfunded schools, people in Harlem in the '60s faced a tough life. Little has changed since then for millions of Americans in similarly hard-pressed communities. The seven-year-old students in the second grade class I taught in the Harlem public school were brilliant, eager, and beautiful, but weighed down by the poverty and insecurity of their families. People supported each other, but life was a daily struggle. The doors were barely cracked open for African Americans to enter college or the middle class, let alone law school or the White House.

Viewing the world from within the community

of Harlem and making close friends who opened their hearts and shared their reality changed my life and perspective. Thanks to their welcoming trust, I have been able to spend 52 years (so far) working to help young people transcend the poverty, classism, and racism that threatened to ruin their lives irreversibly if they did not have the most extraordinary resilience, determination, and support systems to weather the difficulties.

Progress?

In significant ways, some things have gotten better as a result of the Civil Rights Movement and the ongoing struggles for justice and opportunity. We've had changes in the laws that produced more equal rights and opportunities. We've seen changes in public perception that make overt racism unacceptable and resulted in the election of the first black president by popular vote. The blatant racism of a Bull Connor or a George Wallace that you may have seen in the movie, *Selma*, has largely retreated. But clearly the work is not done.

Poll taxes and racist county clerks have been replaced by subtler dynamics that keep poor people disenfranchised, potential voters on the sidelines, and millions of young men of color incarcerated and subject sometimes to inexcusable brutality in prisons and to permanent loss of access to jobs, housing, voting rights, and other opportunities. Seventy million Americans have criminal records that may prevent them from being employed (The New York Times Editorial Board, 2015). Unjust laws and practices still exist, and some new laws are reversing some of the progress of the past decades.

If we want laws that produce opportunity for all, we must make sure that poor people and young people inform themselves, get actively involved, propose solutions, and vote for those candidates for public office in every local and national election who are responsive to their issues. We must not sacrifice the collective power of our hard-won right to vote.

Rebounding Poverty in America and its Deadly Consequences

America still has poverty-stricken and largely segregated communities where people are struggling to survive. Though poverty declined in the '60s and '70s, and again in the '90s down to 11% of our population, it has now increased to 14.5%. Forty-five million Americans are living in poverty (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2014).

The conditions of poverty underlie the upset in Ferguson. Some of the anger after the killing of Michael Brown was a response to the fact that there was no indictment of the police officer and, therefore, no full transparent trial to hold public officials accountable under the rule of law for the death of an unarmed young man. It was also a response to the apparent indifference to young Michael as a human being. He was left to lie in the street for hours, a horrifying expression of what many experience as the lack of respect for the lives of young black men. Americans also saw Tamir Rice's sister being tackled and thrown to the ground like a criminal after witnessing her young brother with a toy pistol shot dead by police in Ohio, after police shot Tamir within two seconds of arriving on the scene. Mere weeks later in New York, Americans saw police choke unarmed Eric Garner to death while forcibly arresting him for selling cigarettes.

These offenses to human dignity have aroused our nation to call for change. These videos have given privileged white people new information that their personal experience did not provide. They are shocked, as they were in the '60s. They are therefore ready to talk and, more importantly, listen. It is important that we talk with them to inform and mobilize their concern.

At the same time as new information is flowing to the privileged, there are decades of stored up anger and despair about the relationships between police and young people in low-income communities, especially communities of color. We all know that this is not only about what happened in Ferguson; it is about the daily realities of millions of people across the nation over decades.

Police officers dedicate themselves to the safety of society and risk their own lives on behalf of their communities. We depend on them for safety and sacrifice. Yet, like all human beings, they sometimes act and react inappropriately, based on immediate fear, deeply internalized bias, or poor training and supervision. This naturally triggers rage and despair when authorities violate their own purpose and others' well-being. But we must transcend both rage and despair and work with respect. We all have things to learn from each other. Our society's legacy of racial bias is not the fault of any one individual or subset of police. It is a collective responsibility for all of us to surface and correct that legacy in our own contexts. Nonetheless, that legacy is regularly revealed in the protected use of police authority against men of color; therefore, that deserves concentrated attention and correction.

These are symptoms of our country's deeper problems: persistent poverty and inequality of opportunity exacerbated by increasing concentration of wealth and power, broad issues of racial prejudice, and systematic separation of different groups of people, some of whom are exploited by the economy while others benefit. The deeper problems include the failure of our government or economic system to eliminate poverty and injustice. Our nation neither provides sufficient pathways out of poverty for those willing and able to learn, work hard, and play by the rules, nor is it committed to eliminating the debilitating conditions of poverty that affect many children from birth. All of this must change for us to create the Beloved Community.

Some myths about poverty

There is a false belief among many people with power and influence that poor people cause their own poverty through their own failures. There is also a tendency to identify poverty and crime only with people of color, overlooking the very large numbers of poor whites. This reinforces the racial separation that must be overcome to create an effective movement for change. If the poverty of white people is obscured, then the racial bias of privileged white people is reinforced in their blaming of people of color for their own poverty. Also reinforced is the powerlessness of poor whites who blame themselves and remain quiet because they have no explanation for their poverty other than their own fault. Class bias and oppression is not a subject for frequent discussion in America. African Americans generally are familiar with the history of slavery and racism; but most poor whites learn no comparable narrative about their own poverty.

Many people hold the false view that poverty stems from laziness, family dysfunction, addictions, failures in judgment, and the cultural and personal weaknesses of low-income people of all backgrounds. This view becomes internalized—actually believed—by many people born into poverty. They blame themselves. They accept the blame. They hurt themselves in many ways every day. They fall or are pushed or lured into the margins. Some play the game by the rules of the street, and eventually many are seriously damaged by that life, and they damage their own families as well.

There is no doubt that many people in poverty have made serious mistakes. It is evident that there are

family and personal problems that both flow from and contribute to poverty. However, it is important to realize that such poverty was (1) produced by the absence of good education, good jobs, affordable housing, respect for talent, adequate family supports, and (2) reinforced by the presence of unequal treatment under the law and lifelong punishments for people convicted of crimes.

We also know that more young black men are killed by other young black men than by police officers or white people. We are not trying to avoid addressing that. The anguish flowing from this violence and from all gang activity is profound and reverberates constantly throughout all low-income communities. Everyone wants to eliminate that violence and the causes of it.

The big questions America faces in 2015 are, “How do we eliminate it? How do we build the political will to eliminate it?” Too many people waste their time blaming and shaming those who live with the consequences of centuries of failed public policy and blocked opportunity. What we should be doing is uniting to offer what all people seek—a chance to live and contribute to the American Dream.

We must provide real options for every individual to climb out of poverty, out of the streets, out of the gangs, out of the shelters, out of despair. We must also eliminate those conditions so no child is born into them.

Limited options for some; more for others

As a privileged white person growing up in a suburban middle class community, I saw that when my teenaged male friends broke the rules (e.g., driving without a license, drinking underage, shooting bb guns from their windows) the local police would give them a warning and advise them not to do it again. The police did not knock them down, punch them, and handcuff them. My friends did not get criminal records. They ended up heroes in the army and successful professionals, with no blemishes on their records. We have potential presidential candidates who admit they broke laws in their teenaged years, yet their privilege and resources offered them second and third chances usually not available to young people in poverty. We all remember presidential candidate George W. Bush’s comment, “When I was young and irresponsible, I was young and irresponsible.”

But a low-income young person of color doesn’t

get to be young and irresponsible without dire consequences. He doesn’t get second and third chances. What is he to do when he has, for whatever complex combination of reasons, left high school without a diploma, been sucked into the life of the streets, or been convicted of a felony? At some point he will decide he does not want to live that street life. But where can he go? Where can he get a job? Who will let him back into school? Who will let him rent an apartment? Where is the big sign that says, “You are welcome here!”?

We are aware that young people can make a lot of money selling drugs. They can feed themselves and their children and buy amazing things with their profits. Drug dealing is the most well structured and seductive economic opportunity system actively seeking low-income young men. Too many of them give it a try, usually after a series of debilitating disappointments or tragedies in other contexts. Dealing is a dangerous but exciting road that gets young men into a lot of trouble. But it doesn’t mean they are bad people or that they should be dismissed as “thugs and gang-bangers.” If they had had equally accessible and more visible chances with people inviting them to build a positive life, career, family, future, vision—a life to make them proud and strong and safe—they would not have chosen hustling. If they had been offered second and third chances, they would have taken them.

YouthBuild

That is why we created YouthBuild.

In the YouthBuild movement, we know the reality of their desire to belong to something positive, because we have experienced it for 36 years with 130,000 young people. No matter the mistakes they have made or the incredible abuse they have suffered in the past, young people want to succeed at building a better life, and they can succeed if given the right set of opportunities. YouthBuild’s caring adults counteract their students’ past mistreatment by believing in them, valuing them, listening to them, and supporting their goals. YouthBuild offers young people a safe community of peers, caring teachers, mentors, and counselors; financial incentives, job skills training, and real jobs; opportunities for higher education, careers, community service, and scholarships; and chances to lead and be admired for their contributions. Equipped with these resources, virtually every young adult can overcome the obstacles they face to become contributing, productive citizens and caring family members. When society offers these

opportunities flowing from love and respect, the young adults seize the moment. Then their own children thrive, and the cycle of poverty is broken.

In the YouthBuild movement, we know how to engage young people in rebuilding their communities and their lives. Since YouthBuild became a federal program in 1992, 130,000 low-income young people in over 300 neighborhoods have produced more than 28,000 units of affordable housing for homeless and low-income people in their communities. Graduates have gone on to college, jobs, leadership roles, and to be great parents. We see the children of YouthBuild graduates succeeding on all fronts.¹

Let me now invite Leslie McSpadden to speak to you about his own life. Leslie is a graduate of YouthBuild St. Louis and a former member of their youth policy committee.

Presentation by Leslie McSpadden

“One day the world will know my name! One day the world will know my name!”

My name is Leslie McSpadden. I am a graduate of St. Louis YouthBuild and the uncle of Michael Brown. Mike’s mom, whose name is also Leslie McSpadden is my older sister. From the time Mike was old enough to talk, until his death, he said, repeatedly, “One day the world will know my name!” Since Mike did not play sports or display any particular talent, our family and friends found the statement curious. However, the tragic event of August 9, 2014 may have been the fulfilment of those words. “One day the world will know my name!”

This tragedy could and should motivate young people to recognize that too many young people—especially young African American males—are dying too soon and wasting too many valuable years of their lives with involvement in the criminal justice system. That could have been me, before I found St. Louis YouthBuild. Because of YouthBuild, I worked hard to earn my GED. Today, I am a second year student at Harris Stowe University. My goal is to become an attorney.

At St. Louis YouthBuild, I learned many things that

¹ To give you a closer look at this process of personal and community transformation, watch this video called *IMAGINE with you*:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4YHOJh2smZk>

helped me turn my life around and get on the right track. I learned the true meaning of leadership. One of the first things I learned at YouthBuild was the YouthBuild Pledge. Learning and reciting the YouthBuild Pledge was a prerequisite for enrolling in the St. Louis YouthBuild Program. Listen up:

We the members of YouthBuild pledge that we are working together;

To improve and rebuild our community;

To relate to each other in cooperative ways;

To develop our potential as leaders;

To educate ourselves and help others along the way;

To be a part of the great movement for justice, peace, and equality;

All this we do in love and dignity.

I knew Mike Brown, my nephew, even before he was Mike. These are principles and values that my sister, Leslie McSpadden taught my nephew. And Mike was a leader. I want Mike’s name to live on and guide young men and women to long, positive, and productive lives.

Mike was a young African American male from a distressed community with all kinds of risk factors that could have worked against him—but Mike Brown stayed in school and graduated with a high school diploma. Do you know that 60% to 80% of young African American males that live in St. Louis City and North St. Louis County do not graduate from high school, earn a GED, or go on to higher education? Again, 60% to 80% of the young males from neighborhoods that are only a few blocks from this school, do not have a high school diploma. Do you find those numbers alarming? And is this failure rate unacceptable to you?

So, let the world know, it’s OK to be like Mike. Tell the young people to stay in school and graduate—to educate themselves and help others along the way. It’s OK to be like Michael Brown! Michael Brown was enrolled and would have started college within a few days if his life had not been cut short. Michael Brown knew that a GED or even a high school diploma is no longer enough to make it in today’s world of work. Encourage all young people to educate themselves and help others along the way! It’s OK to be like Michael Brown! Then the name of Michael Brown will live on in our hearts and his example will be a shining light that gives

strength to young people worldwide to hang in there, beat the odds, do not become a high school dropout, but instead pursue and obtain a career.

My family and I will always be grateful for the vision of Dr. Dorothy Stoneman, Mr. John Bell, and the St. Louis YouthBuild Program for making it possible for young people who need a second chance to earn high school diplomas and GEDs and get on positive career tracks and even become successful entrepreneurs. St. Louis YouthBuild helped me to see the bigger picture, gave me the impetus to broaden my horizons and realize that there is no limit to what I can achieve if I am willing to expend the time and effort. St. Louis YouthBuild helped me to build the solid foundation from which I am determined to launch my law practice.

Finally, I encourage everyone to get involved and join a YouthBuild Program, either as a participant or as a volunteer. Why? Because YouthBuild works! It worked for me.

Thank you.

Thank you to Leslie and his family

As Leslie said, Michael Brown will certainly be remembered. The loss of his life has motivated many good people to improve conditions for young black men on all fronts and to improve police community relations. I also predict that Michael's uncle, Leslie McSpadden, will himself make a huge difference as he becomes a defense lawyer and engages directly with the issues. His work will honor his nephew's loss. We respect and sympathize with all of Michael Brown's family for what they have endured. Let's give Leslie a hand for all of his own good decisions and determination and wish him success in fulfilling his pledge.

The Effects of YouthBuild

While YouthBuild students are pledging to rebuild their communities, let us vigorously persuade our nation to pledge to invest in them, through YouthBuild and other similar opportunities.

Listen to the voice of a mother describing YouthBuild for her son asking how she can get the government to invest more:

Dear Ms. Stoneman,

My son is a changed young man because of YouthBuild! He has been through all sorts of

programs and counseling, in and out of the juvenile justice system, and addicted to drugs. At times, I feared the worst. YouthBuild is a miracle and a dream come true for my son and our family. We have him back! The Brevard County Florida YouthBuild program has changed his life! I am so thankful, so incredibly blessed to have him in YouthBuild. He has changed 100%! He loves this program, and it has saved his life! Thank you for making a difference YouthBuild! I say more tax dollars and funding for this program! Who do I write in congress to ask that this program get more funding? YouthBuild works! My son is living proof!

America has the resources and the knowledge to empower low-income people to transform their communities and their lives on a broad scale. We simply lack the political will and imagination to invest in the change that is needed. Our economic system has reinforced the values of wealth accumulation and economic competition so thoroughly that real change is hard. It has concentrated wealth and power in an ever smaller group of people who have in recent years paid lower taxes and taken increasing control of the political system. Made easier than ever through the Supreme Court's Citizens United decision, corporations can make unlimited campaign donations, further increasing the influence of the wealthy on the political system.

All of this can be changed through respectful, peaceful, nonviolent, determined, hopeful, massive engagement based on love and reason, not anger and rage; through promoting powerful proposals for change, not just protests. It will take time and determination. But it can and must be done.

Too many people have a big stake in the status quo, and they fear change. Too many also do not have real friendships with people who were born in poverty or who have a different racial, religious, or class background; therefore they don't know the realities, aspirations, and value of people different from themselves. Too many have not witnessed and do not believe in the force for good that is now hidden and suppressed in low-income communities, whether the community is predominantly Black, White, Latino, Native American, Asian, Multiracial; urban or rural.

What we know in the YouthBuild movement from deep experience is that enormous talent,

intelligence, and will to make a difference is hidden in all low-income communities, waiting to be seen and heard; to be liberated; to be asked for solutions not yet imagined. It is our job to liberate that force and uplift that voice.

An Example of Youth Voice: *The East Harlem Youth Agenda for the Eighties*

Here is a simple example that we could replicate everywhere. In 1982, when I was director of the original YouthBuild program in East Harlem, we brought 400 East Harlem youth together for a deep dialogue with police, teachers, local business owners, and elected officials, to develop a platform for community improvement. They produced the *East Harlem Youth Agenda for the Eighties*. The agenda covered issues of employment, business and the community, economics, education, housing, crime prevention and law enforcement, youth and the military, the role of women in the community, sex pregnancy and relationships, youth involvement in the political process, and leadership.

Written 32 years ago, the section on crime prevention and law enforcement stated,

The young people felt that police behavior and attitudes toward young people in the community was disrespectful, uncaring, and at times abusive.

The young people felt powerless to deal with these abuses...The police representatives said the police perceive the problem as one of extensive crime and lack of community support in helping the police to do their jobs.

Both sides felt there was a lack of communication between police and youth concerning what are the community problems, how police deal with them, how the community could help, and how the police could change.

Recommendations:

1. The City should strengthen community relations services in the Police Department.
2. The Police Department should give better training to its officers in community relations, especially relations with young people.

3. Groups in the community should hold meetings to let the Police Department know what the community needs and wants from police services; community and youth representatives should attend the Police Community Council meetings and give input.
4. The problems of crime cannot be solved alone. We must work together to solve all the problems of our community. All must be solved for any to be truly solved. We need to keep organizing in a positive direction to oppose crime and the causes of crime, to get:
 - Jobs, better schools, parks, and recreational programs.
 - More conferences like this one to continue steering young people in the right direction.
 - More political power.
 - More economic power through local businesses.
5. We need to develop a campaign against drugs:
 - Dry up the market for drugs through educating people against drug use. Strengthen peer groups to oppose drugs; strengthen ourselves to resist drugs.
 - Apply political pressure on law enforcement agencies to prevent the flow of drugs into our communities.
6. Prevent police abuses and hold police accountable for respecting the community:
 - Police who do wrong should be required to suffer the consequences.
 - People should help their friends or acquaintances who are arrested unjustly, or are the victims of police brutality, by testifying in their behalf. People need to follow through by going directly to the precinct when they see something wrong happen.
 - People should help the police to solve the crimes that are damaging the community.
7. Form Youth Patrols to cut crime.

How many of you think these recommendations from East Harlem teenagers 33 years ago are still

on target? Their recommendations on all the other subjects, while not included here, are also still relevant.

Thirty years later, in 2012, YouthBuild USA invited national youth organizations to nominate members to serve on a National Council of Young Leaders—*Opportunity Youth United*. A diverse national group was formed that produced a set of *Recommendations to Increase Opportunity and Decrease Poverty in America*.²

In their section on law enforcement, this Council reinforced the recommendations above, and added a few more: make sure police are actually policing hot spots instead of avoiding them; create safe routes for children to get to school; reactivate Police Athletic Leagues; encourage residents to correct each other; make sure all residents are aware of new laws; eliminate unfair and disproportionate sentencing for individuals of color; eliminate mandatory sentencing; expand second chance programs and allow for expunging records; let ex-offenders submit their positive achievements to the criminal history systems bank to inform potential employers; and do not permanently deny offenders the right to public housing, voting, scholarships, running for office, and the like. Finally, stop expanding the for-profit prison system so no individuals will have a financial stake in other people being incarcerated.

How many of you agree with these?

Now, in 2015, would this audience add any additional elements to the police-community relations section?

I believe, if they had written them in 2015, the National Council of Young Leaders would have added one more: ensure that there is an independent prosecutor when a police officer is alleged to have made a serious mistake.

In addition to the above recommendations about law enforcement, the National Council of Young Leaders identified six priorities to strengthen the ladders for young people to climb out of poverty, and four areas for broader systems change affecting the conditions of poverty. They have been promoting these with powerful elected officials and leaders. They have been very well received, but they nonetheless see a need for a broader, more visible grassroots movement, so they are preparing to launch a new national movement called *Opportunity Youth United*.

² For more information, visit <https://www.youthbuild.org/NCYL>.

The top priorities of the Council for increasing pathways out of poverty are to expand the following:

1. Effective comprehensive programs that include education, job training, counseling, service, and leadership training
2. National service opportunities to include low income people giving service, not just receiving it
3. Paid internships in private business
4. Access to college and scholarships
5. All forms of mentoring
6. Second chance programs for offenders

There are 6.7 million people aged 16 to 24 years who are out of school and out of work in the United States; about half of them are low-income (Belfield & Levin, 2012). Researchers have determined that it would take only an additional \$6 billion to reconnect one million young adults each year to existing federally funded pathways to education, employment, service, and leadership (Bridgeland & Mason-Elder, 2012). About one million leave high school each year without a diploma. Let's bring them back as soon as they are ready to take the pledge and do the work required to rebuild their communities and their lives.

Opportunity Youth United

We see a need for a broad, large, active, noisy, respectful, visible, peaceful, and caring movement driven by values of love and respect, forgiveness and empathy, and collaboration and responsibility—a movement in which young leaders promote their solutions, join in all the conversations, organize their peers to vote, and lead their peers and the nation to build a future that provides opportunity for all. Opportunity Youth United plans to be that movement.

Opportunity Youth United will not settle for the status quo, for silence, for poverty, dependency and homelessness, prostitution, gangs and drugs, violence and death, a minimum wage that perpetuates poverty, or powerlessness and despair. They will not give up on the vision of a united society in which all lives matter—a society in which there is a reasonable distribution of resources that will empower every human being to thrive, contribute, and join with others to build a safer and better world for all.

I invite anyone who wants to help us build a broad membership organization for action called Opportunity Youth United to contact Elvera Perry at eperry@youthbuild.org

Conclusion

Now, let me close by sharing a poem from an anonymous YouthBuild student.

*Imagine a child captured in his rage,
Anger, violence, it seems to be the only way.
When he feels down...It's as if no one's around.
When the world closes in on him, he only breaks
down.*

*To live in a world where ignorance nourishes a baby,
Death is given by the handful,
And sanity seems to be crazy.*

*Searching and searching...it seems to never end...
For what? No one knows until it's found, my friends.*

*That's why I'm glad YouthBuild is made of family and
friends.*

*In an unstable world it gives me stability.
YouthBuild, my extended family.
I'll love you till infinity.*

This infinite love—the exact opposite of violence and despair—is waiting in the streets of Harlem, Roxbury, Watts, and Ferguson. It rises with awesome predictability and passion whenever caring and opportunity replace emptiness and terror.

I am happy to inform you that the Mayor of Ferguson has invited Julia Tibbs-Abernathy, the long-time passionate director of YouthBuild St. Louis, to bring YouthBuild to the streets of Ferguson. He has identified 20 buildings that Ferguson youth could rebuild as part of their comprehensive YouthBuild program. They will join the rest of the nation's YouthBuild students in rebuilding their communities and their lives, finding their purpose in life, and contributing to the well-being of their community with pride.

Thank you.

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