“A TRIBUTE TO DR. KING – A CHALLENGE TO ARIZONA”

The following is a speech given by Herb Ely upon receiving the Arizona State University 2011 Martin Luther King, Jr. Servant-Leadership Award
January 20, 2011

Congratulations to Alex Wilson. Alex, we are all so proud of you for what you have accomplished in your young life and, imbued with the spirit of Dr. King, for what you will accomplish.

On behalf of Alex and myself, for this singular honor bestowed upon us, I profusely thank the committee and this great university.

Three years before his death, Dr. King was at the top of his game, venerated by those worldwide who shared his commitment to civil rights and despised by those who wanted to thwart and demean his accomplishments. But at the very pinnacle of his influence he broadened his mission.

He became an opponent to the Vietnam War, and became a voice for exploited workers, for the poor and oppressed of all races. Undeterred by criticisms of both friends and foes, he expanded his mission to the larger issues of injustice and inequities within the whole of our society, which he eloquently addressed in his “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech the day before his assassination.

In light of Dr. King’s legacy and mission against injustice, I want to address a grave issue which affects Arizona and the nation. I preface these remarks within the context of the tragedy in Tucson and the eloquence of President Obama. In that last speech, Dr. King said “Somehow only when it is dark enough, can you see the stars.” Is it not remarkable that an African American president came to Arizona in the darkest of times, inspired by Dr. King’s words, to heal and unify America?

The grave issue I address today is immigration. Senate Bill 1070 and pending legislation have created a culture and political atmosphere of discrimination and intolerance to people of color and place of origin. Here is what we are up against. When Arizona leaders passed this legislation, their argument for state action was the absence of a national law to reform immigration. Those Arizona leaders had, and continue to have, an opportunity to call upon members in Congress – and particularly our congressional delegation – to pass such a national law. Their voices and our congressional delegation’s voices have failed in this and likewise failed to pass the Dream Act.

Senate Bill 1070, and the culture it has produced, tends to demonize undocumented workers and their families. That is totally wrong and a disservice to these people. The typical undocumented person comes here to work, to build a new life, and to fulfill the American dream. And while they are here they often enrich and contribute to America’s culture.

Let me tell you about one of these undocumented workers and how he contributed to the lives of virtually every American. Many years ago Jesus Barrios was eating at a campfire, after working in the fields during the day, when a robber appeared. Hero that he was, he attempted to foil the robbery and was shot in the arm. He was taken to a hospital in Sun City and was turned away and sent to County Hospital. Because of the delay in treatment, he lost his arm. We sued the hospital on his behalf and were successful. But more important

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than success in court was that, as a direct result of Mr. Barrios’ perseverance, he was a catalyst for change in the United States. Federal regulations now require that any person who visits a hospital for emergency treatment has to be treated until his or her ailment is stationary. This is true regardless of financial resources or status of citizenship.

Even more compelling with respect to immigration reform is the necessity to pass The Dream Act, as it affects only innocent children. This Dream Act failed to be passed by Congress. It provides for children who came to this country under the age of 16 with undocumented parents to have a pathway to citizenship if they complete college or serve in the military. Who doubts that, if Arizona leaders had been true to their word, this Act would have passed?

Few leaders in Arizona provided leadership. One notable man did so. He went to Congress and fought for this bill and told Congressional leaders the following: “We’re dealing with children, innocent in their own actions, whose lives should not be delayed while we work out all the complexities of immigration. It’s about talent, acquisition and fairness. High achievement must be recognized. These children should not have to suffer for politics.” That man, imbued with the spirit of Dr. King, is the president of this great university – Dr. Michael Crow.

An example of an innocent, Erika Andiola, was 11 years old when her mother, a victim of domestic violence, came to Arizona from a Latin American country to escape that violence. Erika was a stellar student. At Arizona State University she achieved six scholarships. With the failure of the Dream Act, Erika is now in limbo and potentially subject to deportation. The failure to pass the Dream Act is a nightmare for Erika and for 650,000 other innocents similarly situated.

What does Dr. King’s vision – his courage – his legacy – require of us today? Dr. King said “Unity is the great need of the hour.” We cannot be naïve. We know we will not convince everyone. But in numbers there is strength. In unity of similar voices, there is success. We must speak up, one by one, together, talking with each other, with neighbors, friends, roommates, in the classrooms and hallways of schools, through emails and letters to legislators and to editors. And most important – especially for the young – is to run for political office and to serve in important leadership positions. In Dr. King’s name we can change the culture. In his honor we can create a new political atmosphere in Arizona. It is primarily up to young people, through his legacy and inspiration, to make these changes.

Next year Arizona will have a birthday, celebrating its 100th anniversary of statehood. Its Constitution is among the most enlightened in America. The essence of that Constitution is dedicated to the hallowed concepts of freedom, justice, diversity. Let us celebrate that progressive heritage by realizing those hallowed concepts – because I want – we want – we need – in the name of Martin Luther King, to take back Arizona.