

**Robert Russa Moton Museum Community Banquet**

**Thursday, October 13, 2011**

**Keynote Presentation: Mr. Edward Lewis**

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Cynthia, I want to thank you for your very lovely and gracious introduction and for your leadership in helping to organize this wonderful event.

I would also like to commend the leadership of museum executive director, Lacy Ward, the staff, and Board of Directors who have helped to make this cultural institution come alive, bringing both a sense of obligation to serve this community's rich history and our desire to secure the past for many generations to come.

We are not only blessed by the abundance of friends who have joined us this evening, but the history of the struggle to desegregate our educational system, here in Farmville and around the nation – a common and just belief that unites each one of us gathered here this evening that continues to live within the walls of this building each and every day.

For generations, my family had been part of this community's history. Although I was born in New York City and raised in the Bronx, between the ages of 5-15, as soon as school closed for summer vacation, my mother put me on a bus headed to Farmville, and the farm of my grandparents, Mary and Robert Croner.

There, I joined my cousins, side by side we toiled in the blazing Virginia heat in the tobacco fields. Our grandmother Croner used to say, and I quote her: "hard work never killed nobody." Among those cousins were: Barbara Rose Johns, her sister Joan, brothers Ernest, Roderick, or "Roddy", and Robert "Kit".

For this Bronx boy with roots in Virginia, the stories shared remembrances and the traditions of my second home, Farmville, have always remained with me and my family.

The dictionary defines community as a group of people having common interest living in one locality. This evening we celebrate the importance of community, particularly, this small, but very strong and united community of Farmville.

At an early age I witnessed firsthand the power of community within my immediate family; each of us was responsible for a specific task, but we all had to pull together to get it done.

Our grandparents, taught us to appreciate what we had and to share with those less fortunate. As farmers they provided not only for their family, but especially on Sundays when grandmother would set a place for anyone who came through the door.

They also taught us, by example, to never be a victim to circumstances. To always carry ourselves proudly, and with dignity.

When they passed on, my grandparents left 10 acres to each of the surviving 9 of the 14 children, impressing upon them the importance of having their own, of being close to the land, of allowing nature and hard work, to provide. That land has passed down generations and continues to provide. Many of us have second homes here. We have maintained our grandparents home which for years served as the meeting place for our family reunions.

Having your own was a recurring theme in our family. My Uncle Tracy Spencer, who at 93 still lives in Farmville, was my earliest example of entrepreneurship. Recognizing that the community lacked a nearby store, he opened one. He told me to always “have your own”. Those lessons certainly impacted my decision in 1970 to co-found ESSENCE magazine, now celebrating its 42<sup>nd</sup> year. At the time, there was no magazine that focused on Black women, their intelligence, their beauty, their significance. The success of ESSENCE is yet another example of community effort. The loyalty of the ESSENCE audience has resulted in its being recognized as the leading magazine representing African-American women in the world.

Ideas may germinate from one or two persons but most often it requires galvanizing the group for success to be realized....as was the case with Barbara Rose Johns. In April 1951, my cousin, Barbara Rose Johns, then 16 years old, assembled 450 of her classmates at the Robert Russa Moton High School to protest the unequal quality of education and resources made to students of color because of federally mandated segregation laws. Ultimately, this would become

the cause of freedom in education when the struggle in Farmville was enjoined by four other cases that would lead to *Brown v. Board of Education* and the desegregation of schools.

Farmville hasn't forgotten Barbara. Just a few steps from this room, Barbara's portrait, dedicated earlier this year, hangs in the epicenter of this struggle and eventual victory.

As a young man and a student of history, I would come to understand and appreciate these stories because they would eventually impact my own life, as a student growing up in the Bronx, as an undergraduate at the University of New Mexico, as a post-graduate student at Harvard University, and later, as the founder and chief executive officer of *Essence* Communications.

Moreover, I would come to appreciate the strength of community; the very definition underscores the principle that we do not stand alone, but together, in times of adversity and in times of celebration.

This museum is the result of community effort of diverse groups recognizing a need and joining forces to realize a dream to fruition. It will stand as an example of what can be achieved when differences are secondary to the common good. It symbolized all that America is about: unity in diversity and it will serve to remind us to value our history, to learn from it and to move forward.

Our struggles continue today. We see many of our brothers and sisters in peril because of a darkened economy; we witness the cuts made to education, the foundation by which we long to see our children grow and prosper.

And we hear the call of freedom still ringing through the voices of the forgotten – those who are homeless, in prison, or estranged from the health care they need to survive.

But my trip to Farmville, my trip home, would be in vain if I did not see the hope that stands on the horizon.

I speak of hope that comes not just from a community that has grown, nurtured, and supported the roots by which this museum was founded.

I see it in the faces of each and every one of you gathered here this evening. Your presence affirms the very reason we are all here tonight – to celebrate the achievements of our past AND to face the uncertainties of our future.

We do this bound by the spirit of Barbara Johns, and the many thousands of our ancestors who fought to bring us to this day.

Moreover, I cannot help but feel the collective responsibility we have to preserve our community's legacy – the critical stand this small farming town took against a culture where the color of your skin so acutely determined the limits of your future.

If we fail to do so, we fail our own children, our grandchildren, and future generations who will have no clear understanding of the courage and integrity with which Barbara Rose Johns and hundreds of other young students undertook the fight against discrimination sixty years ago.

And Barbara's portrait – this iconic representation of strength and grace, perseverance and triumph, will simply gather dust, its colors fading into the dim light of history ignored. I have faith that the community of Farmville will never let that happen. Thank you very much.