

Rotary
Club of
Charlotte



THIS WEEK'S PROGRAM

February 15, 2022

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Excellence in Leadership 33rd recipient former Mayor Harvey Gantt

By Elly Clary

Former Mayor Harvey Gantt voiced a mostly positive outlook for the country in general and the city in particular as he accepted Charlotte Rotary's Excellence in Leadership award.

He sees the workplace changing to incorporate diversity, equity and inclusion, yet recognizes a need for honest discussion about race between whites and people of color. That includes, he said, being grounded in the truth about slavery and its consequences from before America's beginning to today.

"We need to know how we got to where we are," said Charlotte's first Black mayor. "Out of that we might be able to find a way to handle the truth."

On local growth and its sustainability, “Charlotte’s going to be OK,” he said, but cautioned this city’s future depends on paying attention to affordable transportation and housing, education for all children and dealing with climate change.

Gantt has built a five-decade record of making Charlotte better with concrete and steel as well as with social and political improvement initiatives. Leading Gantt-Huberman Architects, the former mayor and city councilman designed many high-profile Charlotte buildings. His efforts toward improved race relations and enhanced upward economic mobility earned him many accolades, including his name on the Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture.

Introducing Gantt, President Carol Hardison acknowledged that he hired her 22 years ago as executive director of Crisis Assistance Ministry when he chaired the organization’s board.

Former city attorney and past Charlotte Rotary president Mac McCarley interviewed Gantt, soliciting his views on race relations as well as Charlotte’s future.

After the killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis policeman, Gantt said he perceives employers “began to look very closely at how a racial hierarchy that favored white men in the workplace was to the detriment of women, minorities and other underserved populations.”

Movement toward making the workplace equitable and fair will happen if company and organization top leaders are committed to change, he said. He eschewed legislation toward that end. “This has to be generated from the heart,” he added, “from leaders who will lead.”

He mentioned companies he believes are doing a good job, such as Bank of America, Truist, Lowe’s and Deloitte. But sheer size slows their changes, he said.

Many smaller companies are better at inclusion, he said, citing his former architecture firm. When only 2 percent of American architects were black, he said, “we managed to get 40 percent of our staff African-American. We were intentional about making a change.”

Charlotte will continue its healthy growth, Gantt said, if leadership addresses a need for affordable transportation and housing. “I’m encouraged by the new industries coming to town and the wages they’re going to pay,” he said, calling livable wages the solution to the twin problems.

Coupled with that, Gantt warned that educators must pay attention to preparing all students for the workforce, including those who are not bound for universities or community colleges.

Lastly, he worries about climate change. “You should be watching what you do in the area of sustainability,” he said, “and how governments will deal with the reduction of carbon in the environment.”

The annual Excellence in Leadership award luncheon featured a three-course, plated meal. A considerable number of visitors as well as some media representatives were among attendees in person and via Zoom.

*A recording of the program is available here: <https://vimeo.com/678322653>