

ACCEPTANCE SPEECH OF CHARLES W. CHERRY, SR.

National Association of Black Journalists
Region 4 Hall of Fame Induction/Banquet
April 3, 2004

Thank you for this recognition. As I approach my 80th birthday in a few years, the Lord willing, I understand more clearly than ever that any success I have accomplished is the consequence of the unconditional support of a good woman, Julia Cherry, my wife of more than 50 years and the mother of my three children; the support of my immediate and extended family; and important decisions made by my ancestors over the course of more than 150 years of my family history.

Here is part of my life's story. After Reconstruction, my great-great grandfather, Steve Barlow, Sr., was able to amass a large amount of farmland in Americus, Georgia, on which he raised 19 children. Over time, much of the family farm was lost as a consequence of the Barlow children moving north, and by fraud and deceit perpetrated on my great-great grandfather, who was illiterate, by unscrupulous white businessmen and elected officials. As a result, my great-great grandfather and the elders of my family made an important decision that has impacted me and, through our family-owned media, thousands of other people, to this day. They decided to select one of the younger Barlow children to get an advanced education, and to place upon that child the responsibility of making a way for other Barlow children to attend college.

The first to go was my great-great aunt Leila Barlow, who graduated from Spelman College in 1922, received a Master's Degree in English from the University of Wisconsin, and taught at Alabama State University for more than 30 years. Aunt Leila never married and never had children, and devoted herself to education. From the next Barlow generation, Aunt Leila and the elders selected my great aunt Mable Barlow, who attended Alabama State University while Aunt Leila was there, received a Masters of Education from Columbia University, and taught in the Miami-Dade County, Florida School System for more than 60 years. Aunt Mable never married and never had children, and devoted herself to education.

Aunt Leila's and Aunt Mable's sacrifices allowed any Barlow in my generation to attend college. I was sent to Morehouse College, where I was a schoolmate of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. ML, as we called him, graduated in 1948; I graduated in 1949. A few years later, I received a Masters of Accounting from Alabama State University while my Aunt Leila was still teaching there.

My great-great grandfather believed that each generation should do better than the one before. My family's tremendous legacy of education and self-sufficiency led me to Bethune-Cookman College, where I taught for 25 years, then to the state presidency of the Florida Conference of NAACP branches; then to politics as a current and senior member of the Daytona Beach, Florida City Commissioner, and to entrepreneurship, as a restaurant owner, bail bondsman, real estate broker and media owner.

I became a journalist by necessity, not by training. The saying ‘if it bleeds it leads’ is not a recent phenomenon, especially whenever Black people are doing the bleeding or the blood-letting. With my family, I started the Daytona Times more than 25 years ago in the great tradition of Freedom’s Journal and the Chicago Defender: to tell our own story, to educate, and to advocate. I am proud that our newspapers, the Daytona Times and the Florida Courier, continue in that same tradition today.

The Cherry family continues that legacy. Through Tama Broadcasting, which is Swahili for ‘talking drum’, we are now the largest, privately owned Black media company in the State of Florida. Our family now owns and operates WPUL-AM 1590 Victory Radio in Daytona Beach, Florida; WCSZ-AM 1070 News, Sports, Talk in Greenville, SC; WHJX-FM Hot 105.7 in Jacksonville, Florida; WJSJ-FM Smooth Jazz 105.3, Jacksonville, FL; WSJF-FM Smooth Jazz 105.5, St. Augustine, Florida; WFJO-FM Jammin’ Oldies 92.5, Jacksonville, FL; WTMP-FM Jammin’ Oldies 96.1 Tampa, Florida; and what we consider to be the crown jewel of our radio group, WTMP-AM 1150, the boss of the bay Jamz, Tampa, Florida, which is now celebrating its 50th continuous year of broadcasting to Tampa’s Black community. This month, we will add three additional FM stations in the Savannah, Georgia radio market to the Tama radio portfolio.

As I rush to my conclusion, let me be blunt. Many of us, including your parents, aunts, uncles, and older relatives, put their own careers, the welfare of their families, and even their lives on the line so that you could have the opportunities that you enjoy right now. We did not do so so that you could just enjoy the benefits of local celebrity, a big suburban house, a fine car, or the ego gratification of seeing your byline in a major newspaper. We did so because we want you to be the consciences of your newsrooms, to be the advocates for your people, and to provide a counterpoint to the unfair, sensationalized, unbalanced coverage Black America and Black Africa has traditionally received in mainstream American media.

You must continue to do so, despite the personal and professional risks. As my classmate ML so often quoted, ‘the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice’. God will reward you for your courage, your diligence, and your passion to uplift your people. The universe will conspire to assist you, in unexpected ways, to complete your mission.

I also ask you, in the words of Booker T. Washington, to ‘cast down your buckets where you are.’ Electronic media and most print outlets are now controlled by large publicly traded companies which speak with one voice, and which will make you eventually expendable. Black-owned newspapers are, in the words of my friend, former Congresswoman and presidential candidate Shirley Chisholm, ‘unbought and unbossed’, and one of the few autonomous voices left in Black America. We need your knowledge, experience, expertise and your energy; you, whether you know it or not, need our credibility in the Black community, our independence and our tradition of advocacy.

But just working even for a Black newspaper is not enough. Eventually, you must seek to own your own media outlet if you are truly to be free and independent. Only then can you expose the hypocrisy and corruption at the root of the American economic, legal, and political systems, and help make America the beacon of fairness and equal opportunity it holds itself out to be.

God bless you all; thank you for this recognition. I consider you as sons and daughters, and I am proud of your collective accomplishments. Please keep my family and me in your prayers, as you are in mine, and accept this small token of \$500 to support NABJ's mission and goals.

Yours in the struggle,

Daytona Beach City Commissioner Charles W. Cherry, Sr.
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