

Remarks by Johnny Earl on Receiving the 2015 Classified Staff Leadership Award – June 3, 2015

Thank you. It's an honor to be standing in front of distinguished faculty to receive this award. I like the line "We do what we do" that Anne Williams said to me many years ago. "We all have different levels of responsibility around here, but we're all just human beings." My level of responsibility is not as great as some of yours, but it's still responsibility.

I'd like to thank a few people – Lois Yoshishige who pushed me into joining the union and who still pushes me; Carla McNelly who is no longer here with us today, a former senator, one of our first representatives on the Senate. Fortunately enough, she's been able to find another position. She's our past president now and Theodora Ko Thompson, one of your senators, is now president of our union. We wish you well, Theodora. Lastly, I'd like to thank my past supervisor, Leo McIvor, for the last seven years. Some times when the issues got hard, he said you still have to show up. That's why they voted for you and you'll represent them very well. Thank you, Leo, as you prepare for your retirement next month. I'd also like to welcome my newest supervisor, Pat Franken. Change is hard, but as Leo says, communication is everything. Thank you, Pat, for being here.

A little short history about me. What you read Professor Kyr is stuff that happened in the past. I showed up for those things, but they happened in the past and I cannot rely on my endeavors that I had in the past. I have to rely on my endeavors that I have today. What I do today is what matters. As I prayed to God for the words that I speak to you, not so much to persuade you but to have you hear a voice that is different from your own, to persuade you that there are others here on this campus who are being forgotten.

As it was mentioned, I am at the bargaining table with the seven universities – and I won't try to bargain a contract with you or with the institutional board here at this campus. That's not the role we're bargaining. We're bargaining with all seven universities. All seven universities in this state do matter. The jobs that classified workers do are no different from one school to another. These universities were built by taxpayers in this state; they are ours. I am not from Oregon, but I want to say that if I was, as I feel I am, I want to protect and be a good steward for those buildings and those people who work at those universities.

I came to Oregon in 1979 – this time of year – for summer school. I was here for five years and I had to get out of here, because you can take the boy out of Chicago, but you can't take the Chicago out of the boy. Oregon planted a seed in me. I saw something here that I had never seen before. I saw a community that was welcoming to me, but as a young man I had to go and I'm so happy I left, because the best way for

me to appreciate Oregon was to leave Oregon when I was young. I got a chance to see – I won't call it the world, but I lived back in my home town of Chicago, but also in San Francisco and San Diego – to see something, to have some experiences. We live in a bubble here. It's a great bubble; that's why I came back to it, but at the same time it's a bubble. The world is outside of us, outside of Eugene and to appreciate living in Eugene, I had to go out there and see what it's like out there. It did not drive me back to Eugene; it encouraged me to come back to a place. My Eugene is the UO; that's what got me here and it's what keeps me here.

When I came back to the UO in 2001, I went over for a job at Campus Operations. Memory is a great teacher. I remember when I was a student in 1981-82, I crossed that street and, at that time, most of the Campus Operations employees took lunch around the same time. I was going into the office and I felt just the biggest staredown by the employees there. I felt so out of place. I did fill out the application, but I didn't get the job. By the time I left Eugene I did not want a job. But when I crossed that street in 2001, I said to myself, "Times have changed." And this place gets to change, too. I was so encouraged when we started up a diversity committee here on this campus. I was so pleased that George Hecht, Director of Campus Operations, asked me, thought well enough of me, to represent my union. That's a passion I had before I came here and it's a passion that I keep here, which is to make this university a university for anyone and everyone. Campus Operations has changed. It is now welcoming. I don't feel out of place, but at the same time, we still can do better.

I was talking to my mother just yesterday about receiving this award and I was telling her about some of the things I was preparing to say. There's nothing worse than having a week or two to think about making a speech, because you find yourself talking to yourself about the things you're going to say.

I don't know how causes find me, but a cause found me. It captured me. I wasn't looking for anything else to do, to be honest, but this cause found me in 2013. These young, black individuals who work in fast food restaurants across the country started complaining about not making enough to live on and I started thinking that's the same complaint we have here. In the university system in Oregon, there are 1200 employees who make less than \$15 an hour. They make not enough to sustain them and their families and, guess what, they also make enough where they qualify to rely on state services. Money that we are putting into our universities; that money could be put to better use. They work at these great universities, but then they don't even make enough to survive on. Some of them need to have two jobs, but most importantly they qualify for public services. Something is wrong as we build beautiful buildings, as we have students who drive cars that are worth more than I make in a year. Something's wrong.

We are hearing it from everywhere now. Los Angeles, the Port of Seattle, and other places have passed plans to bring some of the lowest-wage workers up. Last time I checked, we're right in the middle of that. We're not immune to that as a university. We cannot afford to employ people who make not enough to sustain themselves. Again, I'm

not bargaining with you; I am just trying to plant a seed. Rosa Parks said, "I've learned over the years that when one's mind is made up, this diminishes fear." Just because my mind is made up doesn't mean I have no fear. I am still fearful. I was talking to somebody who said it took him 10 years to make that much money. I said, "That's the point. It took you 10 years to make a sustainable wage and that's about as much as you're going to make." One of the proposals we have at the bargaining table is to move everybody up to \$15 per hour. It's about time! Here in Oregon we know a little about planting seeds. We have big, beautiful trees that were planted. If you all have backyards, you know a little about blackberries. When the seeds are planted, they just keep growing. I'm hoping this idea, this thought, is planted in your minds that we have to figure out a plan. I did not say it has to happen this year. I didn't say it has to happen next year, but we need to make a plan to raise those at the bottom up. It's time!

In closing I'd like to quote Malcolm X. He was a radical, but these days Malcolm X wouldn't be thought of as a radical. He'd be thought of as a man who was speaking his mind. He said, "Usually when people are sad, they don't do anything. They just cry over their condition, but when they get angry, they bring about change." We've seen it in this country. We've seen it over the last couple of summers. We've seen riots in the streets and unhappy people. They happen to have been black, but it's not just blacks who are unhappy. It's my personal opinion that people are in the streets, because they don't have health care - most importantly because they don't have a sustainable wage. We have to be trendsetters at this university. Maybe we need to lead the rest of the country. When I say this university I mean all seven schools. Maybe one day we might bargain with just the UO, but today that is not the case. As I said to President Scott Coltrane with all due respect, unfortunately we all have long memories. If we look at how the GTFs were treated in their last bargaining campaign, we're not interested.

To you I say thank you very much for this award. I will cherish it. I don't really deserve it. To be honest, there are people out there who have done twice the work I have and I am inspired by them every day. Thank you.