

**State of City 2008**  
***“Together We Can”***  
**February 7, 2008**  
**Convention Center**

**Introductions and Thanks**

Thank you Charlie, and thank you all for being here tonight. I would like to introduce Columbia City Council: E. W. Cromartie, Anne Sinclair, Sam Davis, Tameika Devine, Daniel Rickenmann and Kirkman Finlay. I also want to recognize my wife Beth and my minister Wayne Horne.

Tonight I first want to thank our City Manager Charles Austin for his hard work and dedication to our City. His strong leadership and steady hand are greatly appreciated. The City has hundreds of employees whose hard work and dedication make Columbia a great place to live and work. I would ask all of our city employees to stand. In Columbia, our relationship with our neighborhoods is strong. I would ask that our neighborhood presidents stand and be recognized. We also have a strong relationship with the Chamber of Commerce and our business community and would ask that they stand.

We have a great relationship with Richland County Council. Tonight we have with us Chairman Joe McEachern and other County Council members. With us also is the Chairwoman of Richland County School District One Wendy Brawley and other members of the School Board. Also with us tonight is Richland County Sheriff Leon Lott and members of the Richland County Legislative Delegation.

Tonight I especially want to thank and recognize Dr. Sorensen for his leadership and friendship. Dr. Sorensen has forever changed the relationship between the City and the University. Innovista will be his legacy to Columbia. I would ask that Dr. and Mrs. Sorensen stand.

Also with us tonight are our City Year Corp members. In an era when many across the nation see young people as apathetic or cynical, we are countering that notion with these servant leaders who are, daily, on the forefront of the battle against poverty, injustice and oppression. I am so proud of these hard-working, idealistic red-jacketed young people who greeted you earlier. Please join me in applauding them.

## **Vision**

Our vision for Columbia and the Riverbanks Region is to become a world-class City that keeps and attracts the best and brightest minds to make this their home where they can pursue their dreams and goals. A City that surrounds its people with a culturally rich and progressive environment that embraces our many diversities. A City made up of strong and growing neighborhoods. A City that enables and encourages all of us to reach our maximum potential and beyond by working together to lift each other up. And a City we are all proud to call home.

This vision is coming into view. The pieces are beginning to fall into place. We are watching the transformation of our economy into a knowledge economy, the transformation of our downtown into a live, work and play environment, the transformation of our sense of who we are into that of a world-class competitor, and the transformative power of what we can achieve when we all work together with a common vision and set of values. We are at the dawn of a new era for Columbia – an era that will see Columbia go from good to great.

But we have a lot of work to do. We have to go beyond just providing services, to support those things that make our city unique and give us cultural texture. We have to keep up the strong drumbeat of business development. We have to commit to solve problems together.

Tonight, I want to give you a report on how we are doing this - what we accomplished in 2007 and two new key challenges that demand our attention in 2008.

## **Delivering Basic Services**

Before we do anything else, we must deliver excellent basic services. In 2007, we made a lot of progress in this area. We overcame some big challenges, but we are poised to move our basic services to the next level.

### *Police and Safety*

Fighting crime will always be our number one priority. While preliminary figures show violent crime decreased in Columbia for 2007, we know that job one is hiring the most outstanding and innovative police chief possible. We want to continue community based policing and continue our cooperative relationship with Sheriff Lott. The City

Manager will release the names of the five finalists for chief tomorrow, and this Sunday we will hold a reception for the public to meet and give input on the candidates. We are committed to funding our retention plan for police and fire and meeting our goal of having four hundred officers. We have a long-term strategy to make security cameras part of our arsenal against crime. We have established a community wide Criminal Domestic Violence Task Force to review all our strategies and efforts. I want to thank Tameika Devine for her outstanding leadership on this issue.

*Fire Department*

We opened a new fire station on Spears Creek Church Road to serve the Northeast area of Columbia. 57 new firefighters joined the Department in 2007, and a host of new equipment and trucks were added.

*Finance Department*

The City's AA credit and bond rating was reaffirmed by both Moody's and Standard & Poor's. While we know the City's financial health is sound, we know our bookkeeping is not. The City has brought in a team of CPA's with the Municipal Association to help us reorganize the Finance Department and establish the best practices for municipal accounting. Additionally, we will be working with the Midlands Business Leadership Group to solicit their expertise and input to ensure we have solid financial management practices in our City. I want to thank Councilman Kirkman Finlay for being a tireless advocate for financial accountability and fiscal responsibility.

*Water and Sewer*

The City will have invested since 2006 over \$17 million on rehabilitation of water and sewer mains including \$9 million in this year's budget. All of the Northeast water system improvements should be complete in the spring of 2009.

*Street Division*

The Street Division cleaned over 44 miles of curb and gutters, over 11 miles of ditches and pipe, and over 35,000 catch basins and inlets last year. We installed or repaired almost 12,000 feet of sidewalk, 7,500 feet of curbs and gutters, and we filled over 3,200 potholes. Improved street lights are being built in Olympia and Elmwood.

### *Development Services*

The City opened the Development Center and implemented top-to-bottom reforms to the building permit process. As a result, the current average review time for a building permit is 12 1/2 days. We have created our Express Review for commercial projects. In April the Development Services Department began posting reports of property maintenance violations within each of Columbia's 85 neighborhoods online.

### *Planning*

We will adopt our ten year comprehensive plan-The Columbia Plan 2018-in November. This plan identifies our goals, objectives and strategies for managing growth and development. City Council will receive the Five Points Master Plan, Future Five, in March.

### *Code Enforcement Task Force*

The Code Enforcement Task Force issued its first report in June covering abandoned vehicles, front-yard policy, graffiti, and signs within the setback. Staff has been charged with implementing those recommendations. I want to thank and recognize the Chair of the Task Force, Reverend Wiley Cooper, for the outstanding job that he and the Task Force have done.

### *City-County Cooperation*

We partnered with Richland County to build the Innovista parking garages, expand the animal shelter, and hired a new 911 director. We resolved the TIF dispute, and agreed to a process of joint planning.

## **Supporting Cultural Enhancements**

Delivering basic services well will make our City good, but if this is all we do, we will not be great. If we are to achieve our vision for Columbia, we have to do more. We have to invest in and support enhancements that make our City unique and give us cultural texture. Bright minds stay and are attracted to places rich in personality, that appreciate nature and beauty, and are filled with personal expression.

### *Canal Front, CanalSide Esplande and the Greenway*

Both the Esplande at CanalSide, a \$3.5 million walk way, and the \$7 million Canal Front behind EdVenture, are being bid with construction starting in the spring.

These projects, when combined with the Gervais Street Connector, represent a major step in the completion of the Greenway. Additionally, the River Alliance is completing the plans for the Saluda Riverwalk. A new forty-eight townhouse development on the Shupert property called The Falls has been announced, which will include an entire new section of our Greenway.

### *Streetscaping*

Columbia has completed a number of streetscaping and infrastructure projects over the last two years that have dramatically changed our City. Main Street, Harden Street in Five Points, Two Notch Road, and Lady Street, have seen significant improvements. Now the City is beginning to streetscape and upgrade the infrastructure on additional blocks of Main Street and North Main Street. The City will continue to pursue designation as a Bicycle Friendly City.

### *The Garden District*

Historic Columbia Foundation has shown an expansive vision that unifies the unique historic assets of the Robert Mills Historic District with the tradition of public and residential landscapes as part of the Garden Restoration Initiative and District.

In 2007 the City took ownership of the Modjeska Simkins House and asked Historic Columbia Foundation to serve as the steward for this site, ensuring that the legacy of this giant advocate for social equality and reform will not only be preserved, but continue to inspire the future of this community. I want to thank Robin Waites for her leadership on this issue.

### *Columbia Festival of the Arts*

The Columbia Festival of the Arts will be back in 2009 for a series of major events in partnership with the National Hydrogen Association Convention. The Nickelodeon is aggressively pursuing its capital campaign to relocate and renovate the former Fox Theatre on Main Street. The Renaissance Foundation is doing the same work on the former Bethel AME Church. Workshop Theatre is planning to build a new theatre on Elmwood. Trustus Theatre has completed renovations. All of Columbia can and should be proud of our arts community. I want to thank and recognize Andy Witt of the Cultural Council.

In addition to these enhancements and events, we have other unique cultural attributes that add to Columbia's rich and diverse personality.

*EdVenture*

EdVenture's national reputation continued to grow in 2007 with more than 60% of its nearly 200,000 visitors coming from outside Richland County and South Carolina, yielding an economic impact of nearly \$12 million dollars for the Midlands economy.

*Monteith School*

The Booker T. Washington Foundation and the Eau Claire Community Council are cooperatively working to finalize the restoration of the Monteith School, which will be a destination point in North Columbia.

*Columbia Museum of Art*

The Columbia Museum of Art will be celebrating its ten-year anniversary on Main Street this July and has been a central part of the downtown renaissance. The Museum has been on an exciting path of growth and program expansion over the last few years. Attendance and outreach have risen 75% since 2004. The installation of a beautiful piece of public art -- the fountain sculpture, Apollo's Cascade, at the corner of Main and Hampton Streets was a highlight of 2007.

*Metropolitan Convention Center*

The Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center has continued to serve our city as a central meeting place for a wide range of organizations and events. Last year revenues for the Convention Center increased 66% and now with the Columbia Hilton open, we can attract even more conventions in 2008.

*Benedict College, Allen University, and Columbia College*

Benedict Stadium is a wonderful addition to Two Notch. We funded Allen University with the restoration of Chappelle Chapel, a significant historic building with great tourism appeal, and a groundbreaking occurred on a new student dormitory. We helped fund Columbia College's new recreation facility that will also serve neighborhoods in North Columbia. The former ditch near Water and Nance Streets is now known as the Bay Bridge Canal System, a \$5 million project that has united what was once a divided neighborhood.

*Drew Wellness Center*

The East Central Redevelopment Commission and Redevelopment Plan have been approved. The Charles R. Drew Wellness Center is a state of the art facility that caters to all walks of life. Thanks to the tireless work of Council Cromartie over \$95,000 in scholarships have been raised and the center has over 2,700 members. We renamed the Sligh Avenue golf facility The James E. Clyburn Golf Center in recognition of the service of Congressman Clyburn to the citizens of Columbia. A grocery store and bank is under construction at Cecilia Saxon.

*North Columbia*

The City is especially emphasizing code enforcement and security in North Columbia. The North Columbia Master Plan and the North Main Streetscaping Project are top priorities. We will be working with Columbia College to develop the first of the Catalyst Projects in the North Columbia Master Plan. The Belmont Initiative is an example of what the City must continue to do. I want to thank Sam Davis, Tameika Devine and Daniel Rickenmann for their leadership in this area.

*Good to Great*

Finally, let me note that the Greater Columbia Chamber of Commerce has met with unparalleled success in its new endeavor, a capital campaign entitled, "Navigating from Good to Great." This effort has already focused our minds on taking those steps that will enable us to realize our vision and represents the cooperative spirit that is transforming our City.

**Business Development**

In addition to delivering basic services and investing in cultural enhancements that attract bright minds, if we are to become the City that is our vision, we have to engage concerted business development outreach

*Office of Economic Development/Business in Motion*

The City's Office of Economic Development received state and national awards for partnering with the University of South Carolina in establishing the USC Columbia Technology Incubator. The Incubator has assisted sixty-three companies and created five hundred and fifty-four new jobs, including one hundred and forty-two minority and

female jobs. It is also home to three companies in our International Business Center. One company that graduated from the Incubator and will be in Innovista is Collexis. Collexis software searches and mines large amounts of data and information. Grant Jackson called Collexis “Google on steroids.” Joining us tonight from Collexis is Larissa Kulcsar.

Together with SCANA and the Chamber of Commerce, we unveiled the new Business in Motion program to support our existing businesses. Volunteer stakeholders will be asked to work with us to reach out to at least 100 businesses in the first year.

### *Engenuity*

Engenuity continues to build the entrepreneurial infrastructure that is enabling the growth of our knowledge economy. We have established Columbia as a center for fuel cell technology commercialization, through the Fuel Cell Collaborative. In 2008, we will build on our Fuel Cell District with construction of one of the first hydrogen fueling stations in the Southeast. We will also integrate our sustainability efforts and fuel cell commercialization efforts by looking for opportunities for the City to purchase fuel cells that will lower our area emissions. In just 13 months, Columbia will host the National Hydrogen Association’s annual convention, which will attract the international hydrogen and fuel cell industry’s largest companies. At the National Hydrogen Association’s pre-conference meeting here in October, the head of Shell Oil’s Hydrogen division said he had never seen such a united business, education and governmental community as we have in Columbia behind the growth of our fuel cell economy. Following Richard Florida’s presentation at Engenuity 07, Engenuity began working with the Greater Columbia Chamber of Commerce, New Carolina and Columbia Opportunity Resource on the Columbia Talent Magnet project. Over 8000 students graduate from a Columbia institution of higher education each year. The Talent Magnet project is designed to keep these bright minds in the Columbia region by connecting them to existing community initiatives.

### *Disparity Study Implementation*

The Office of Business Opportunities had a very successful year with our FastTrac program. In November City Council finalized our Subcontracting Outreach program for City contracts as well as our Mentor/Protégé Program. The Subcontracting

Outreach program provided many subcontracting opportunities for smaller firms. The Mentor-Protégé Pilot Program provides an opportunity for small businesses to increase skills and gain experience by partnering with general contracting firms. The City has started the Business Spotlight Program that recognizes one small business a month at our City Council meeting. We are increasing minority and female owned companies as well as all small businesses. Economic inclusion is a guiding principle for Columbia.

### **Tackling Problems**

All of our work on delivering basic services, supporting cultural enhancements, and business development will be in vain if we do not also face up to the challenges we have. The problems in our City belong to all of us and we must all work together to address them as a community. In 2007, we made strong progress on some of our most pressing problems.

#### *Comprehensive Gang and Youth Violence Initiative*

Last year we called for the development of a comprehensive and long term strategy to combat youth violence and gangs. The first step in this strategy was a comprehensive and detailed analysis of the gang and youth violence problem in the Columbia area by the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice at USC and Benedict College. This assessment has been completed. Now the Gang and Youth Violence Prevention Council composed of leaders from various government agencies and community organizations must implement the recommendations. This will be the toughest but most important job we will ever face.

#### *Affordable Housing*

There is no doubt that every part of Columbia is experiencing rebirth and redevelopment - Columbia bucked the national and even regional trend with a 14% increase in residential building permits last year. The recommendations of the Affordable Housing Task Force were adopted by City Council in March. The Task Force's first recommendation was that the City treat the CityLiving Program as a priority and continue to fully fund the Program over the next five years. Through the first two years of the CityLiving program we have made 256 loans with our partner banks totaling over \$27 million. If we maintain this pace, we are on track to make 668 loans over a five-year

period, exceeding our goal of 550 by 118 loans. The total dollars lent would be over \$71 million. Our goal was set at \$60 million.

The Belmont Initiative, twenty-five affordable new homes that replaced drug and dilapidated houses, is a great example of our affordable housing efforts. *The State* Editorial Board wrote that the Belmont Initiative “illustrates Columbia’s commitment to reinvigorate and preserve older communities as well as increase the city’s affordable housing stock.” I want to thank Sam Davis for his leadership on the Belmont Initiative.

We created the Housing Emergency Loan Program (HELP) to meet the needs of our elderly and disabled citizens in funding crucial items such as HVAC systems and roof repairs. This program recently won an award from the State.

#### *Homelessness*

The City’s Housing First Pilot Program starts this month. The University of South Carolina’s Department of Medicine will provide case management and other supportive services and the Columbia Housing Authority will provide the housing. Housing First has shown that providing stable housing as quickly as possible can result in higher levels of success and cost effectiveness in addressing the core issues that cause homelessness.

The City has successfully opened our temporary Winter Shelter on Calhoun Street. The Winter Shelter now has bus tickets for people going to medical, employment, and housing appointments. The City now has active, strong partnerships with the Salvation Army, Harvest Hope, the Metro Baptist Association, Midtown Fellowship, the Midlands Interfaith Homelessness Action Council, and the Columbia Metropolitan Airport.

#### *Protecting Neighborhoods*

Protecting and preserving our existing and established neighborhoods was a top priority in 2007. Council unanimously passed the Community Character Protection Ordinance. Growth is good; density is good; and subdividing is not necessarily bad but it needs to be planned with some check and review. Working together-the City, neighbors, builders, and realtors, I know we can find the right balance.

## **Transformation in Progress**

We are delivering basic services, investing in our cultural assets, promoting our businesses and tackling our problems, all with an eye on creating that vibrant world-class city that will attract bright minds – and as a result, we are seeing dramatic changes around us. We are no longer looking to the day when Columbia will transform – we are in the midst of it now. Our investments are beginning to pay dividends.

### *Gecko Technologies*

This morning Millennium Cell, a world leader in hydrogen battery technology, announced it is moving its subsidiary company, Gecko Technologies, to Columbia. Gecko is commercializing a portable fuel cell battery. The decision to locate in Columbia was driven by the presence of fuel cell expertise at USC and the overwhelming support the community has shown for becoming a world leader in fuel cell technologies. Gecko projects it will employ over 100 people by 2010. This announcement is validation of the collaborative community-wide efforts we have made through Engenuity to grow our knowledge economy. I would like to ask Rex Luzader , Vice President of Millennium Cell to stand.

### *Innovista*

Innovista came alive in 2007. The Horizon Center and the Discovery Center are nearly complete, as are the two parking garages financed by the City of Columbia and Richland County. A privately funded research building is the next step. John Parks was hired as the Executive Director, and the first three tenants have been announced. City Council adopted the Innovista Master Plan in October and has established funding as a top legislative priority. According to a recent survey, 90% of City residents support our research campus and waterfront park plan. I would like to recognize and thank Bill Boyd, Chair of the Waterfront Steering Committee.

Even at this early stage of Innovista, the Association of University Technology Managers recently ranked USC number #11 out of 114 public universities in the number of start-up businesses created. Joining current USC research professors like Dr. John Van Zee in fuel cells are new research professors that have been attracted to our unique environment, like Dr. Ken Reifsnider conducting research in Solid Oxide Fuel Cell and

Dr. Brian Benicewicz researching polymer nanocomposites. We are more confident than ever that Innovista will be the driving force in building a strong new economy for our City.

### *CanalSide*

After a decade of planning and public investments, CanalSide is being built by The Beach Company. This twenty-five acre site will eventually house up to 750 single-family homes, town houses, condos and apartments. As *The State* said (12-23-07), “CanalSide and other downtown residential projects are the result of more than a decade of public spending—an experiment in jump-starting development that the city embarked upon way before the Vista was considered cool.”

### *Bull Street Neighborhood*

The Bull Street Neighborhood will transform our Downtown. The master plan calls for apartments and single family homes, affordable housing, office space, and retail space. The South Carolina Supreme Court ruled in February how the property could be sold. In May the South Carolina Department of Mental Health approved submitting the master plan in the form of a PUD to City Council for rezoning, and the Department is in the process of selecting in March a firm to market the property.

### *Main Street*

Main Street and City Center Partners had a very productive year. Phase II of Main Streetscaping is starting now. We adopted and funded a retail strategic plan in September, and the City Center Partnership hired their retail recruiter. Urban Tour 2007 brought thousands of people to Main Street. Additionally a new \$60 million nineteen story office tower by John Holder was announced in December. The Palmetto Center is on the market and poised for renovation, and the new Sheraton Palmetto Building hotel is almost complete. The Downtown office market remains strong with a 90% occupancy rate. *The State* said it best in December “Downtown Columbia’s office space has grown dramatically over the past five years, while the vacancy rate has been dropping, showing a vibrant downtown market.” I want to recognize and thank Matt Kennell and other City Center Partnership Board Members.

### *Other Development*

Two new Vista Hotels in addition to the new Hilton contribute to the growing hospitality and tourism business. In Arsenal Hill 54 new single family homes are being built meeting all levels of income. Center Vista, a 90,000 square foot office and retail center has its first tenant and will begin construction soon on a former industrial site. The Lincoln Street Parking Garage is being built.

On Rosewood the Rosewood Hills development is under construction and complimentary retail, hospitality and commercial office development is filling in along Rosewood and serving the needs of the surrounding neighborhoods. Rosewood Hills will offer a unique mix of affordably-priced and higher market homes.

### **Agenda for 2008**

We are truly living in a golden age in Columbia. We are moving forward with our renaissance, revitalizing, reinvesting in, and repopulating our city. We have reversed a three decade decline in population and homeownership. We have built a collaborative spirit of inclusion and mutual respect that distinguishes us from so many other fractured and divided cities, not just in the South, but across the entire country.

But we cannot slow down. We must recognize that our vision and our future is threatened by the downturn in the national economy. Nationally, job growth declined in January-the first drop in four years. We recently saw the largest one month increase ever in South Carolina's unemployment rate. Some of our real estate development projects have seen delays and even cancellations. Many of us are holding our breath as we wait to see how the uncertain world markets will affect us personally.

In the face of these external threats we must strive to maintain our momentum and keep building on our achievements by continuing our progress in basic services, cultural enrichment, business development, and addressing the problems that threaten to slow our stride. There are two such issues that we will make priorities in 2008 – environment and education.

*Green Vision: Environment and Climate Protection*

The greatest challenge facing our existence is the threat posed by global warming. We need a new energy future. Going green is critical for our environment and our economy. On September 6, 2006, Columbia City Council endorsed the Mayors' Climate Protection Resolution and established the Climate Protection Action Committee (CPAC). I want to thank Anne Sinclair for her leadership on this issue and chairing CPAC and would ask that any CPAC members stand and be recognized. Since the beginning of this year, CPAC has worked to develop an action plan for city government to reduce its emission levels. The plan targets building related energy use, transportation, recycling, waste reduction and land use. This plan was unanimously approved by City Council in May, and city staff is implementing the recommendations. The Green is Good for Business Conference was held in September and was a huge success. The CPAC committee also worked to develop a Green Business Program intended to recognize businesses in the Columbia community that are making efforts to protect the environment. The program is designed to appeal to all businesses – large and small -and is a way to encourage the business community to take action towards climate protection while also offering recognition for doing so. We have four goals for 2008.

First, we must take action on our Energy Audit recommendations. In 2007, the City of Columbia selected AMERESCO to conduct a City-wide comprehensive audit of all its facilities and operations to identify areas for energy and utility savings improvement opportunities. In March we will receive the Audit. The recommendations will include energy savings primarily in City buildings. The recommendations will not only reduce global warming emissions, but also save taxpayer money and stimulate our economy.

Second, we must develop comprehensive water conservation strategies. We are blessed with Lake Murray and the Broad River as the sources of our water. Columbia has avoided the drought restrictions that are common in Georgia and North Carolina, but we should not take anything for granted. 2007 was a wake-up call and we need to be prepared before water shortages threaten us.

Third, we must continue with waste reduction and recycling; the City's e-waste program was the first in the area; we should be able to recycle more materials.

Fourthly, we must reduce pollution in the environment to avoid future EPA restrictions and for our health. The best way is to continue to support the RTA with full funding.

Environmental protection is a regional issue that will have huge ramifications about how we move forward as a community. It is also a public health issue. The City needs to take a leadership role, and we need to create partnerships. It is also an economic issue. As break throughs with hydrogen fuels occur in Innovista it can both reduce our dependence on carbon based fuel, and create jobs in Columbia.

*Education: "Together We Can"*

In addition to moving steadfastly to address our environmental challenges, we have another issue in Columbia that demands our attention in 2008 – integrating the success of Richland One School District into our overall plan to achieve our vision.

Before I talk more about this, I want to introduce you to some people who have already embraced our vision for Richland One and are committed to the ideals we want to achieve. This is a group of students and mentors from the Richland One Lunch Buddies program, the Big Brothers and Big Sisters program, and City Year's Tutor and Mentor program. I invited them to join us tonight because they represent what we can achieve if we commit to work together to build a stronger community.

Richland One is a good school district with award winning students and staff in new and renovated schools. But Richland One can be great – and that is our goal. Not only do we owe this to our children, but Columbia's economic future is dependent on the success of Richland One. A community-wide need requires a community-wide solution.

Last month over eighty of our citizens travelled to Mobile Alabama to see the success they have achieved through a united effort. I want to thank all the elected officials, neighborhood leaders, business leaders, educators and the press who went –and rode the bus.

We went to Mobile to study their program named "Yes We Can" - a coordinated, multi-faceted, community-wide effort to improve the local school district. It is not a traditional program, but more of a journey. In 2008, we will begin our "Together We Can" journey in Columbia. We will start by asking our local universities and colleges to

help us do a comprehensive review of the existing data, to see how Richland One compares to other similar districts. We will also conduct a comprehensive public input process that leads to a public consensus on what we, as a community, want for our children and schools. We will develop a strategic plan to achieve the consensus goals. Our plan should be data and performance based. It must include a reform agenda and partnerships with the business community, the faith community, our non-profits, and local government. We must work to create innovative and creative incentives for businesses to support Richland One schools. We must recruit volunteers to serve as Lunch Buddies, mentors and tutors. We must provide internships to students who wish to pursue specified careers. And we must increase the availability of both summer and school-to-work transitional jobs for students in Richland One's A+ Schools. In short, we will involve our entire community in taking the steps that will see Richland One go from good to great.

The State Editorial said it best in describing our effort, "there are few investments this community can make that would have as much impact on its future as one targeted at improving the education of our children."

I am confident we will achieve our goal of making Richland One a shining star in our community because of the people standing before you tonight. They have already written the first chapters in our book of success. There is the story of Willie Black, a USC sophomore in the Big Brothers program who mentors and tutors Damarius Allen, a middle school student at Hand. Damarius' mother, a single parent, says Willie provides a positive male role model in Damarius' life. There is the story of Nolan Green at City Year, who manages 23 volunteer mentor tutors who go into Watkins-Nance, J.P Thomas, and Sandel elementary schools every Monday through Thursday to help students who are falling behind. And then there is the story of Malinda McCray and Sierra Carlos. Malinda, who works at Palmetto Health, says that when she first met Sierra's as her lunch buddy at Carver Lyon Elementary school, Sierra was quiet, shy and removed. Those early lunches were long and uncertain and ended with a hesitant wave goodbye. But Malinda was committed. She kept coming back to spend time with Sierra. Lunch by lunch, month by month, with persistence, dedication and confidence, things changed.

Now, Sierra greets Malinda with a smile. Their time goes by quickly, filled with the animated talk and interaction of two old friends. When it is time to go, Sierra leaves her with a long hug. When I asked Malinda why she got involved, she told me she kept hearing all the negative things about our kids these days and instead of joining the chorus of cursing the darkness, she decided to get involved - to do what she as an individual could to turn on the light in a child.

### **Conclusion**

Ladies and gentlemen, we are living in a time of opportunity, transformation and hope. Our potential to achieve our dreams and goals for our City has never been stronger. With persistence, dedication and confidence Malinda McCray turned on a little light at Carver Lyon elementary school. Working together with that same spirit, we can turn on the light in our community and make Columbia the greatest place in the world to live.

Thank you.