

**REMARKS FOR DR. RAY GIST  
MASSACHUSETTS DENTAL SOCIETY  
DIVERSITY IN DENTISTRY: A NIGHT TO REMEMBER  
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS  
THURSDAY, MARCH 3, 2011**

Thank you, it's a great honor to be here tonight at the Museum of Science. And before I begin, I want to commend the Museum on their outstanding exhibit "Race: Are we so Different?" It's an eye-opening exploration of what it means to be human and just how little our outward appearances mean to our nature and essence.

I also want to commend the Massachusetts Dental Society for the outstanding work of your Inclusion Task Force. I'm especially excited by the fact that this task force is built around member engagement and participation, while welcoming other organizations into the MDS fold.

Your work mirrors that of the American Dental Association, which continues to reach out to dentists who differ only in appearance, while building on the good will and collaboration from its 2010 Diversity Summit with the National Dental Association, the Hispanic Dental Association and the Society of American Indian Dentists.

As I travel around the country, I sense a growing feeling of optimism and energy. There's a new spirit in the air, one that promises great things for organized dentistry and it is incumbent upon us to tap into that energy and expand that feeling of hope.

I sense a new spirit of belonging across our profession. Members are beginning to feel that there are no barriers between us ... that every dentist, in every community, shares common values and a sense of pride in all that we have accomplished.

It is up to us to expand that spirit of belonging and to share it broadly. We can – and must – share it with every licensed dentist in our land, in every community.

We need to show bright young high school and college students that the doors to opportunity and inclusion are wide open for them ... and that we will do everything possible to help them succeed and grow throughout their careers. We need to make every dental student feel that he or she belongs to this special profession from the first day of dental school.

And, as we consider our future as a dental profession, we need to be there when bright young minds, in all American communities, start to feel a bit lost ... start to wonder if their good grades can ever add up to a better life ... start to wonder if they can recapture the American Dream that was built on the hard work of parents and grandparents, to achieve a better life.

I want the dental profession to be the same beacon of hope for every American child that it was to me as I grew up. And while we can't expect every hopeful child to join us in the dental profession, we should expect every child who wants to belong, to feel welcome ... and to feel that we care about his future.

Like many of you, dentistry has opened many doors for me, and I feel a special obligation to give back. I made dentistry my career choice when I was 13 years old, and I fulfilled my life's ambition the day I opened my first dental office in Flint, Michigan.

It wasn't an easy road to get there, but I didn't expect it to be. What makes this profession so enjoyable is being rewarded for the sacrifices that we make to establish ourselves as dedicated professionals. My personal journey began in rural Arkansas, and continued in Flint and Ann Arbor, Michigan, where I received my DDS degree from the University of Michigan.

I spent two years in the Air Force after graduation, and made my next, most significant, decision when I finished my tour of duty and returned to Flint. That decision was to join organized dentistry; to develop friendships and business relationships with colleagues, just like you, and to join a family of fellow professionals.

When I look back at all the times I could have become discouraged and chosen a different path, I'm thankful that I remained committed to organized dentistry. And I'm still amazed by the art and science ... the practical magic that we, doctors of oral health, perform on our patients to guide them towards optimal oral health.

What do I mean by magic? William Shakespeare once wrote that "the robbed that smiles steals something from the thief." I believe there is something profound about our profession at the core of Shakespeare's thought. By giving people the power of a healthy smile, we arm them with the power to disarm. And by giving our patients that power, we give them the opportunity to rise and make the most of life.

Think of all the human potential we unlock through our practical magic. Think of all of the great thinkers and innovators who may be hidden away from civilization behind walls of poverty – and think of the small, but important, role we can play in knocking down those walls and inviting these growing, vital minds – with bright, eager smiles -- into the larger world.

Every day, around the globe, these walls are starting to crumble. As globalization spreads opportunity to millions of children in China, India, Brazil and across the globe, just think of the ingenuity that is being unlocked, day by day. Great mathematicians, writers, inventors and, yes, dentists are joining a global marketplace of ideas.

And we, too, have that same opportunity in our own country to open those doors. In fact, it's no longer just an opportunity, it's an imperative ... it's critical to our future. Unless we, as a nation – as a people – take advantage of every opportunity available, to make the most of our human potential, other nations will overtake us.

This is true on the largest scale, and it includes the dental profession. It's up to us to make our children aware of, and excited and enthusiastic about, dentistry – and to think of our young patients as the inheritors of our proud work. Once we get them excited, we need to educate them about organized dentistry to ensure that they realize that we have significant incentives to offer them as members.

It is also paramount that we offer incentives to students from diverse backgrounds to pursue careers in dentistry, and that we strive to do everything in our power to make it easier for all students to repay their loans on time, and to start their careers on secure footing.

This commitment to inclusion needs to continue throughout all dental careers, and I'm proud that the ADA has been a leader in this regard.

We are dedicated to inclusion, as demonstrated by the significant number of programs and activities devoted to include dental professionals that have been excluded from our activities in the past, such as the Institute for Diversity in Leadership, which provides a diverse group of dentists with education and experience to set new leadership paths within the profession and their communities.

This includes the Student Ambassador Program as well as the Council on Dental Education and Licensure's Career Guidance and Diversity Activities Committee, also known as Committee D – which is comprised of 14 members, including representatives of the NDA, HDA, and the Society of American Indian Dentists.

But beyond creating special programs and paths to leadership, building a welcoming association for all dentists means creating a collegial atmosphere. Prospective members won't feel this sense of belonging unless we feel it ourselves.

For those of you who are married, just think of the first time you met your spouse's family. Did you go to that meeting hoping that there would be lots of bickering? Did you want to feel like an outsider – as someone to be viewed suspiciously?

The same holds true for us ... if membership is our constant focus, then we need to keep in mind what prospective members might think of us if they saw us in action. How respectful are we? How welcoming are we? And how much opportunity do we provide for everyone to be part of our family?

That's one of the most important reasons that the respective Presidents of the American Dental Association, the Hispanic Dental Association, National Dental Association and Society of American Indian Dentists now hold bi-monthly conference calls to promote dialog and identify common issues for collaboration.

The ADA has made significant progress – but now it's time for us to confront some significant questions – and to encourage engagement and participation.

Through the ADA's new dialogue nationally, and MDA's at the state level, these are the questions that we can all ask and answer:

**How do we make lifelong membership in our associations highly attractive for all dentists, regardless of personal backgrounds and practice settings?**

**How do we engage with other associations representing diverse dentists, nationally and internationally, to speak with a unified voice on oral health policy and the equality of opportunity for entering and succeeding in the dental profession?**

**And finally, what can we do as a profession to help the nation overcome disparities in educational opportunities at all levels – from pre-school through professional degrees – so the nation can enjoy the benefits of diversity in its health care workforce, in dentistry and beyond?**

It's one thing to open the doors to all citizens in our country ... but quite something else to let everyone know that their participation is important and that it makes us stronger.

If I stand here today as a symbol of anything, I hope that I'm a symbol of that strength.

President John F. Kennedy once said "if we cannot now end our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity." Organized dentistry followed his call – and as President Obama demonstrates, so did America. Organized dentistry provided me with the opportunity to belong, and to participate at the highest levels. Let's build on that message of progress with one of enthusiasm.

Let's step beyond the progress of the last generation and begin a new cycle of hope. Thank you for being part of that progress ... and for sharing your enthusiasm for the future of dentistry, one wrapped with a spirit of belonging.

Thank you.