

Remarks of Jeremy Travis
President, John Jay College of Criminal Justice
At the Memorial Service for
Kenneth Thompson
Christian Cultural Center, Brooklyn, NY
October 15, 2016

To: Pastor Bernard.

To: Attorney General Lynch, Governor Cuomo, Judge Lohier, Congressman Jeffries, Judge Johnson other colleagues on the dais.

To: Mayor DeBlasio, elected officials, dignitaries, friends and colleagues.

To: Ken's parents, William and Clara Thompson; Ken's beloved Lu-Shawn and his children Kennedy and Kenny, Jr. and Ken's extended family.

I am honored to be invited to speak at this remarkable gathering of people from across our city, state and country whose lives have been touched by Ken Thompson. I stand before you as representative of a large community of John Jay students, faculty, staff and alumni. I would like to take a moment for a special recognition for Ken's Mom, Clara, another member of the John Jay family. With the passage of time, we tend to forget the bravery of those pioneer women who, like you, in the early 1970s, were among the first women to enlist in the New York City Police Department. You did what cops do – you went out on patrol in our neighborhoods – but you did your jobs often in the face of resistance, humiliation and discrimination. You paved the way for hundreds and thousands of other women, including many John Jay graduates, to embrace policing as their profession. We are indebted to you. And clearly Ken learned much about courage and public service from you. This apple did not fall far from your tree.

We recognize this morning that many other organizations can claim Ken as one of their own – NYU Law School, the US Attorney's Office, the Justice Department, the Treasury Department, the Kings County DA's office – but we believe we have a special connection to Ken Thompson. We had him first. He was one of us: Ken Thompson Class of 1989, a John Jay Bloodhound through and through, a fierce advocate for justice. And we know that Ken was also aware of his special connection to John Jay. He demonstrated his love for John Jay College in thousands of ways, large and small. In recent days, we felt like we have lost a son, a brother, a friend, a colleague. His passing has caused shock waves to ripple through our campus in palpable ways.

Ken came of age at John Jay. He followed his mother to become a student at John Jay as she had been. He initially pursued his childhood dream to follow her pioneering example and join

the New York City Police Department. While a student at John Jay, he came to realize that he had other ambitions in mind, to study law and use the law as his weapon in the cause of justice. Perhaps most importantly, he met Lu-Shawn at John Jay, another celebrated John Jay love story. He once told the endearing story about how he was self-conscious about the adhesive tape holding his glasses together at their first meeting. Clearly that did not stand in the way of a deeper connection. On a fundamental level, Ken realized his intellectual potential at John Jay. He once said, "It was at John Jay where I first learned how to relate questions of history, social science, biology and government to issues of criminal justice." He became a star student, graduated at the top of his class, and in his speech at Commencement made a point of thanking his professors, one by one, with stories of how they had challenged him to dig deeper and do his best.

Many young people come to John Jay and excel. We are proud of those who go on to successful careers. But Ken was different. He was one of those cherished alumni who never stopped showing his gratitude for his education. One of his favorite professors, Blanche Weisen Cook, here today, told me that Ken came back as a guest lecturer in her class – every year. She remembers how her students were mesmerized by Ken's account of his work on behalf of Emmett Till. Imagine how his personal story created a connection between our students, a shameful chapter of our nation's history, and the difference a fierce advocate for justice can make.

When we created the Pre Law Institute ten years ago, I invited Ken – who was then in private practice – to join our Advisory Board, which he did enthusiastically. We then invited him to be our alumni honoree at Law Day, a special day-long forum for John Jay students interested in careers in the law. His speech was masterful – a riveting mix of his personal story, memorable lessons in the law, and inspiration for the next generation to learn from his example. I vividly remember what happened next: our students flocked to him after his remarks – he was now a certifiable rock star. A long line quickly formed. For the next hour – yes, a full hour -- he spoke with each student individually. Think of the impression he left on those students. But also note Ken's generosity of spirit, his devotion to the next generation, and his recognition of his responsibility as a public figure.

Ken's friends at John Jay watched with acute interest when he decided to run for District Attorney in Kings County. This was an uphill battle against a long-term incumbent, but Ken knew that the voters of Brooklyn were yearning for a new vision of justice in this important office. And he was right. Once again, as he was formulating his campaign platform, he recognized his John Jay roots and turned to our faculty for advice on new approaches to crime and justice. When he was elected, he invited me and Professor David Kennedy to join his transition committee. He asked us to write a position paper on the emerging new role for elected district attorneys in the modern era of deep dissatisfaction with the failures of the justice system, particularly on issues of racial justice. Always the student, Ken asked us to convene a briefing with reform minded prosecutors from around the country to stimulate new ideas among his leadership team. What a privilege that was for us.

Two years ago, when our City was going through a rough period in police-community relations, John Jay decided to create a year-long initiative called "Bridging the Divide: Reimagining

Police-Community Relations.” We decided to invite Ken, then in office a very short time, to be our kick-off speaker at a forum co-sponsored with NOBLE, the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives. Ken came to the forum with one visual – a very powerful visual – a poster that showed the picture of each individual whose conviction had been overturned by his new conviction review unit. He then proceeded to tell the stories of each of the men on that poster ... bringing them, their experiences and the injustices of their convictions into the room. It was riveting and classic Ken Thompson: in his world view, the law is ultimately about the lives of the people, and justice is ultimately about government doing the right thing, fearlessly. I quote from his speech: “My work with respect to wrongful convictions, I believe, is helping to bridge or narrow the divide. And to help completely bridge the divide, we in law enforcement have to show mercy while performing our duties.” Not many prosecutors use mercy as their north star. I suspect he thought a lot about mercy as a parishioner here at the Christian Cultural Center.

Ken Thompson was a son of Brooklyn, a prince in our City, a beacon for justice for our country. Tragically, his life has been cut short, but his message to all of us is enduring and powerful. I conclude my remarks today by quoting Ken’s closing observations in his lecture at John Jay: “The good news is that each and every person in this room can help bridge the divide. All you have to do is have a commitment to do justice fairly, equally, and without fear.” Ken, you showed us the way; at John Jay we are proud to have been a part of your life journey; now, all of us pledge to do our part -- “to do justice fairly, equally, and without fear.”

Thank you.