

Speech by Douglas Orane, Chairman & CEO GraceKennedy Limited at the  
Jamaica-America Friendship Association Awards Function on Saturday, March  
18, 2006 at the Mona Visitors Lodge, UWI, Mona, Kingston 7

Sir/Madam Chairman etc.

I must confess that I was completely taken aback by the news that the Jamaica-American Friendship Association had decided to present me with the Martin Luther King Humanitarian Award.

I am deeply honoured and equally touched that you would consider me worthy of this award which not only suggests that I am a humanitarian, but carries the inestimable prestige of being linked to one of the outstanding humanitarians of our time - Martin Luther King.

It is difficult to express how much I appreciate your association's generous gesture - so I will just say a simple "thank you".

The fact that the award is offered in the name of Martin Luther King is of particular importance to me as this renowned gentleman was one of my role models when I was growing up in the 50's and 60's.

I followed his trail blazing career which had such a singular impact in his country and throughout the world with keen interest. Even today, I can remember the substance of some of his speeches and can summon up in my mind the striking rhythm of his delivery of these speeches and the resonance of his voice.

Perhaps one of the most important messages that he left with me was his love of people, not in the collective sense, but as individuals, who each had within them the spirit of God regardless of his or her outer material circumstances. Today, the wisdom of this insight guides me in my own approach in dealing with everyone with whom I come in contact.

While I have never consciously thought of myself as a humanitarian, this award has made me consider what influences in my life have guided what you see as my humanitarian instincts. I think that it is primarily due to the home in which I had the great fortune to be brought up. Some of my earliest memories of my parents revolve around their caring approach not only to relatives and friends but to others in the community in which we lived.

They were always willing to offer a helping hand to anyone who needed it including those who were in less fortunate circumstances, or for one reason or another were experiencing difficulties of one kind or another. Helping others was a way of life for my parents and influenced me greatly.

It was natural therefore that when I made the important move to study to be an engineer at Glasgow University in Scotland I began to do voluntary work in one of the underprivileged communities in Glasgow. The community was known as the Gorbals and was notorious as being prone to violence and displays of other anti-social behaviour.

During my years at Glasgow University I spent many Friday evenings among a group of 10 year olds whom Dickens might have called "little urchins". They were I must confess, a scruffy lot, quite capable of sometimes outrageously unacceptable behaviour. But this was where I found evidence of Martin Luther King's belief that each individual has the spirit of God in him or her. I

found that if dealt with kindness and love, my 10 year olds often revealed the spark of goodness which existed in them, waiting to be tapped.

This experience also taught me other important life lessons:

- that we should be grateful for what we have;
- that we should always show compassion to our fellow human beings, and wherever possible make a contribution to assist where needed.

I have learnt that simple gestures of kindness and caring have profound effects perhaps not easily discernible, but like the proverbial stone thrown into the water, has a ripple effect which often goes way beyond one simple act.

I have seen firsthand, that Jamaica does not stand alone in having inner city issues; some of the poverty stricken environments which I came across in those days were as bad as, or even worse than our own inner city areas.

I make this comment only to remind all of us that we may have problems but we must desist from thinking that we are unique in this; or that our problems are far worse than anywhere else. Let us be realistic about our difficulties but let us not indulge in the bouts of hopelessness which I sometimes hear around us.

In my early thirties, I had the great good fortune to join GraceKennedy - a company with a corporate philosophy that was so much in accord with my own.

GraceKennedy expressed this philosophy in two simple words "We Care". It was a spirit which has pervaded the organisation from the 20's when the company was founded and which is still very much alive.

This spirit has been expressed throughout the years in a wide variety of ways, to name a few - through simple donations to charitable causes and without publicity, through assistance for education, by way of bursaries and scholarships, and through the GraceKennedy Foundation's assistance to worthwhile projects in a wide variety of organizations and institutions. But perhaps most consistently and most effectively, I believe that we have been able to make a difference to the communities adjoining GraceKennedy organisations through the Grace & Staff Community Development Foundation which is funded by our staff and company. The Foundation is probably best known for its four Homework Centres in Kingston - but there are other important activities including:

- offering micro credit and business counselling to small entrepreneurs
- mentoring for youth
- parent education and school feeding programmes, and
- counselling services.

Some of those responsible for the programmes at Grace & Staff are here this evening, and I would like to take this opportunity to recognize them. (Recognition)

Reflecting once again on Martin Luther King's life, I learnt that one of the greatest catalysts of change is example - the way we live our lives. We are far more likely to positively influence someone's life by example rather than by exhortation.

It is with quiet satisfaction that I note that Jamaica is responding to our current challenges. More and more, civil society is reaching out to others and beginning to give meaning to the biblical

injunction to be "our brother's keepers". I think it is a trend that we should all encourage and foster wherever we can. It is in fact a return to a tradition which was alive and well in Jamaica when we were a smaller and simpler society - as an example, look at the large number of schools which were founded by trusts created by private bequests from the eighteenth century up to just before the Second World War. These are sterling examples of philanthropy.

Commitment to philanthropy ought to be an area through which our people capable of doing so give back joyfully to the society that has provided the framework for us to have successful lives and careers. We should ask ourselves - How can we contribute in tangible and meaningful ways? By way of example, I have taken a personal decision to contribute in whatever way that I can to my alma mater that helped to mould me for adulthood - Wolmer's.

Bear in mind that contributions do not only have to be in monetary terms - sometimes giving our time is even more important. If we look at Martin Luther King's country, we have a superb example of a society where philanthropy is a way of life and where people are happy to contribute to their fellow citizens and institutions in a variety of ways.

In our society for whatever reasons, we are less likely to be philanthropic; and particularly so since Independence. We as a people need to look at this and ask ourselves why, and see what might be done to renew one of our valuable traditions.

However, I remain optimistic about Jamaica's future. I am heartened by the smooth transition in the generational change of leadership in the political parties and also in the case of the post of Governor General.

I believe that this can be a catalyst to inspire Jamaicans to behave differently to each other, giving us a new platform for social harmony and economic growth.

I am also heartened by the proactive and open attitudes of young people - it is a healthy approach provided we have the good sense to channel this in a positive way.

I am not filled with a sense of hopelessness or fear and as I look around me, I see myriad opportunities, particularly for young people. Here are just a few examples. We need thousands of suitably skilled construction workers particularly welders, pipefitters, tilers, and carpenters, as more industrial, commercial and residential projects are coming out of the ground around Jamaica. My colleagues in the tourist industry tell me they are always short of good chefs and well-mannered service staff at all levels. There is a constant unmet demand for Jamaican reggae musicians to play overseas.

In my travels to the Eastern Caribbean, I have seen construction booming and I am told that 18,000 construction workers will be needed, in Trinidad & Tobago over the next year.

The CSM is making these opportunities open to us and we need to learn more about them.

In addition, young people must begin to prepare themselves with the right attitudes and skills to take advantage of these opportunities.

The message I want to leave with you this evening is really embodied in the life and heritage of Martin Luther King which is summed up in the age old Biblical injunction that we must be our brothers' keepers. An older generation of Jamaicans not only had this as one of their central beliefs; they in fact, lived their lives according to this injunction.

I do not wish to oversimplify or underestimate the challenges that our country faces at this time - but I believe if we hold fast to the belief that we are our brothers' keepers and try to serve others during our lives, we give ourselves a tool which will guide us to do the right things as surely as any compass can.

Martin Luther King said it so well in his own words: "Everybody can be great ... because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love."

In closing, I thank the Jamaica-America Friendship Association for presenting me with this honourable award and giving me the opportunity to say a few words.

May God bless you all.