

**RIGHTING HUMAN RELATIONS IN CHATTANOOGA**

Annual Leadership Chattanooga Alumni Address

October 19, 1987

Dr. David Lewis Beebe,

chair,

Commission on Human Rights and Human Relations,

City of Chattanooga



GIFT TO CHCBL  
October 1987.

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by the Reverend Dr. David Lewis Beebe, chairman,  
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It is an auspicious evening. As I came in I was informed that Jupiter is in opposition. The stock market today dropped the deepest it has ever dropped in its entire history. The United States Armed Forces knocked out two Iranian radar platforms. And the Cardinals have dropped the first two games of the World Series. So, I'm not sure this is the best evening for me to be addressing you.

On the other hand, who knows what it means that Jupiter is in opposition? The stock market dropped partly because the bond market is doing so well. The President is at least talking to Congress. And the Minnesota Twins don't worry about the Cardinals.

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012 My topic this evening is Righting Human Relations in Chattanooga. I begin with a little bit of trepidation because, as I look around the audience, I see other members of the Commission on Human Rights and Human Relations in the City of Chattanooga, and I also see members of the Chattanooga Venture Human Relations Task Force, including the Chairwoman of that Task Force. So I hope I get it right. Since so many of them are here, I will not tell you who they are because I might miss somebody.

Chattanooga is at a very critical and hopeful turning point in its history. I believe that four of the indications that it is at such a turning point are:

- the existence of the River Bend Festival,
- the existence of Chattanooga Venture,
- the existence of Leadership Chattanooga, and
- the existence of the City Commission on Human Rights and Human Relations.

And all four of them for the same reason: they indicate that this city understands that the essential element in progress is people.

027 Chattanooga's Commission on Human Rights and Human Relations was officially founded -- 027 that is, the first members were appointed, in mid-July of this past summer. How did it get started? It has behind it a long history, but its immediate history has to do with the fact that it is the result of the Chattanooga Venture process. In the fall of 1985, having sorted out what its various priorities were, Chattanooga Venture established a Task Force on Human Relations, which looked at the issue of human-relations needs in our city. It was a large task force. It was broadly based and representative of a wide diversity of community leaders and citizens. The task force, after a good deal of discussion about the needs of the city, composed an ordinance, or rather, the draft of an ordinance (which went through several draftings) and ultimately it was turned over to the city attorneys (and went through several more draftings). That ordinance was initially based on a comparison of ordinances of several other cities, especially the ordinances on human rights and human relations of High Point, North Carolina; New Hanover, North Carolina; and Davidson County in Tennessee. In the State of Tennessee, Davidson County has a Human Relations Commission. The leader 043 of that -- the head of that -- the executive director is Fred Cloud. And Tennessee has a State Commission on Human Rights. Dr. Warren Moore is head of that. He was previously on the Davidson County Commission.

It is interesting that next month the Tennessee Commission on Human Rights will observe its twentieth anniversary. It is very likely that Chattanooga's Commission on Human Rights and Human Relations will be well noted there, because we are a feather in their cap. There are not many commissions on human rights or human relations in the state of Tennessee. In fact, we are the first local body to be called a human rights commission in this state.

051 What about the background further back? Over the years, Chattanooga has had a number of groups, some of them informal and some of them organized, that have attempted in various ways to bring about better human relations and better race relations. Such groups as the Panel of American Women, earlier the Community Relations Conference which recently made-- some of the people who were in that have made a videotape which is available at the library. Groups within the churches, including the Church in Urban Life. Groups that were developed to increase communications across different lines in the city, such as, for several years, the Urban Forum. And, most directly related to this area over the years, the Mayor's Committee on Human Relations.

The Mayor's Committee on Human Relations existed under different mayors in different ways; but, in general, it was subject to the desires and viewpoints of the current mayor. It functioned, I believe intentionally, in a low profile way. It was usually reactive to problems and crises in the community, and then tended to sort of drop out of visibility and to be available when another crisis arrived--and that in itself was a problem for it. For it meant that, with all of its advantages, it had necessarily to be perceived as essentially reactive rather than taking initiative.

070 It also reflected a problem the City of Chattanooga had and has had for a number of years and is now beginning to overcome--and consciously overcome: There developed in Chattanooga self-image that we had "good race relations," and this self-image was very bad for race relations in the city. What happened was that we tended to congratulate ourselves on how well we had gotten through the late Sixties and the early Seventies and to talk about what good race relations we had. And that meant to people who saw the problem that we were content with how far we had come and did not expect that we would need to go much farther. The very fact that, in recent months, leaders of our city have acknowledged the existence of large areas of concern in regard to human relations, and, specifically, race relations, is a very positive factor in the future of this city.

085 The Venture Task Force looked at the question of what Chattanooga needed and decided that we needed a commission which would be established by ordinance. It discussed whether it should be a city or county commission, and decided that it would be possible to get it established more effectively as a city commission and that its influence might spread and other parallel groups be established later. It needed to be established by ordinance so that it would have a relatively independent existence and a continuing existence, so that it would not be reactive but would establish initiative, would look at things before they became problems, and would set directions, and would deal with causes not simply with symptoms.

The task force was uncertain whether this should be a human rights commission or a human relations commission. It finally "cut the Gordian Knot" by deciding that it would be both, because we needed in the community both improved communications in human relations and the ability to correct human rights and injustices.

095 Regarding the need for human relations, some years ago, in a publication which was really a forerunner of Chattanooga Venture, there were a number of interviews. I was interviewed there. It was called "Chattanooga in Motion." You may remember that big broadside. I said among other things:



I think that the real key to communications in the community is access. In other words, what channels are available through which people can present their viewpoints and gripes? I don't think that the city has really examined and evaluated right methods of access. Access in this community occurs at the City Commission meetings every Tuesday morning; but, since the TV cameras are there, people tend to use these meetings as a way of posturing before the media, and there is no real process of dealing with grievances.

Having said that way back then, I have then to say that I know the TV cameras are showing up at the Human Rights and Human Relations Commission, too, and we're going to have to be very conscious of the tendency of people to posture before the media. We have to keep working on the need to direct ourselves to the issues, regardless of who is watching--but also discover that we have to create other and broader forms besides our commission meetings. 105

I went on to say in those remarks:

In order to change this attitude of distrust, I think you first have to identify the grass roots structure that already exists in the community, be it a neighborhood organization, the PTA, etc.

It is obvious to me that building human relations in this city is one of the primary responsibilities we must all address, because one of the crucial issues in this city is the wide diversity of groups of people who neither understand nor know each other.

But, building bridges of communication in this city will not be enough. There must be the building of structured change. And the structures of communication must be done in such a way that they will become decisive structures of change.

That's the human relations side. The human rights side is also important. If that were to be set up, it would seem that it would need to be a body which could deal with grievances as well as to make recommendations for legislation. It could not be a judicial body. It does not even have the power of subpoena, because the city of Chattanooga, aside from its own employees, does not have the power of subpoena. Many people, as the commission was being established, thought that this meant that our commission was a paper tiger and its teeth had been pulled. They failed to understand that there are a lot of other ways to make sure that change occurs and that people show up: such as the power to investigate, the power to expose, the need to conciliate, and the right to recommend legislation. It would be nice if we had the power to subpoena. We don't have it. 132

Another thing which made some people think that this commission was a sop and not a really important commission was the fact that some people thought that it had been provided in place of a police review board. This came as a great surprise to me, and I think, to some other people, because it never occurred to me in all the time that we were working on the task force that the two were to be considered together. The other was an issue to be considered on its own merits.

There's another problem. And that problem is that a lot of people, since the commission has been formed, do not clearly understand that, if you are going to deal with human rights, you had better be careful that you do not violate human rights in the process of doing it. 140

This meant that, if this commission were to be responsible, before it could respond to the voices that were in many ways clamoring that we must get down to specific topics (and, specifically, the Silvers matter), we had to be sure that we had established due process. Due process means that you're being fair to everybody and that they know what to expect and can follow the rules. We had to set that up.

So much for the problems that came out of creating a commission which is pretty unique, because it is dealing both with human rights and with human relations. We cut the Gordian Knot on that issue.

We will have one more problem, which may be an opportunity. We are currently in the process of interviewing and testing candidates for the position of Executive Director for this commission. We're going to have to find somebody who is able to represent in his or her person two very different types of quality of person. We'll probably get somebody who does one better than the other, but both we need. We need someone who is an expert in group dynamics, is able to respond spontaneously to people, to unite people, and can handle diverse groups together. That's what you need for human relations. We need someone who is very knowledgeable about government procedures, who thinks logically, and who proceeds carefully step by step. That's what you need for someone who will deal with human rights grievances. Fortunately, there is one requirement that we need for both of them, and that is most important of all. That is, that our Executive Director must be a person who has a passion for fairness. If we get a person who matches our job description, we're going to have a fantastic person. Fortunately, I understand, some fantastic people have applied.

Well! That's some of the background of the problems that were inherent in the very construction of the ordinance.

Finally, in December 1986, the City Commission, on third and final reading, adopted the ordinance establishing this commission. It was not implemented immediately. It was to be selected--eighteen members, six each year, rotated on three-year terms--to be chosen by the Mayor after broad consultation in the community and on advice and consent of the "Board of Commissioners," or the City Commission. The appointments began to be made in the spring. They were not completed until mid-July. And whether it only appeared that way, or it really was that way, who can say?--but, the commission was finally convened at the time that there was a request for the commission to consider the Silvers matter. And that very fact and conjunction posed for us one of the most serious problems we will have to deal with. For, as I've tried to point out, what can make this commission different from its predecessors is that it is not simply reactive, but that it takes initiative.

But, it was being asked to react. And it was being pressed because it was not reacting rapidly enough. The entire picture tended to lean toward the assumption that this is a human rights commission which will make judicial decisions. It does not have judicial power. It has the power to recommend; it has the power to conciliate. It was being asked to be what it cannot be. It was being asked to be reactive. Therefore, it was created in not the best way for it to be created. It will at some point have to overcome its birth in order to do what it was created to do, that is, to be a group that is proactive (as they say these days). That means that it takes initiative. It has not really helped itself greatly in learning, and helping the community to learn, to think of it, not as a reactive body and as something more than an investigative body, because it has bitten off a big load. And it did so at the last meeting.



As you perhaps know, the commission at its last meeting agreed to consider three very controversial matters in the city of Chattanooga: the Silvers matter, the Suttles matter, and the Bradford matter. It assigned these three to review panels. These panels are excellent panels. I have been with one of them already, and they will do their work, I am sure, carefully and fairly. Ultimately, it will be of great benefit to our community. 215 But the very fact that we are now involving ourselves in this type of approach means that we will have to work doubly hard to make it clear to people that our primary responsibility is to take the initiative to create structures of communication and change in this community and not simply to react to crisis.

There are some other areas (and these are generally within the "rights" side of the agenda) where I think the commission will turn out to be doing things somewhat different than people now envision (including probably some of the members of this commission). For this commission has a much broader charter than people realize. It is in section 1:

The purpose of this ordinance is to encourage understanding and good will, to promote justice, to eliminate discriminatory practices between and among its citizens because of race, religion, creed, color, sex, age, handicap, national origin, or economic status.

Just to take the last one: That means that one day this commission will discover that it is not only talking about discrimination because of someone's race. It is also talking about discrimination because somebody is poor. That's a big order. But, it's in the ordinance.

And, even in the field of race, this commission will discover that this community is much more pluralistic than it now sees itself to be. I said something in the Real Chattanooga curriculum last year. I said that 243

There is a sense in which, with all of the different groups represented here in the past, there was a kind of bottom-line, middle-American understanding in philosophies, ethics, and ways of life, but, that American society has become more pluralistic. And that pluralism is altering Chattanooga. And that pluralism has been expanded here by the substantial influx of people from other lands. We have many Hispanic people here now, as well as an increasing number of Southeast Asians. No longer need we go to see the world; the world has come to Market Street and the malls.

I made a serious omission on that list. I should have mentioned a very important segment of this community: Indian Americans. All of these people are a part of the racial and the cultural mix of the city and a part of what it means to work for better race and human relations; and, ultimately, I hope that, as the years go on, they will be reflected in the membership of this commission. 253

And yet, if you listen carefully to section 1, you will see that there is still another area--or three areas, really--in which this commission will have its hands full in the future. For, listed in there are three areas of discrimination that have been coming up on the list of grievance and rights problems nationally. They are: age, sex, and handicap. I think it probably was not uppermost in the minds of those who adopted the ordinance, but, it is what is happening in our society, and it is of interest to me that already we have had two different groups concerned about the handicapped approach our commission. There are a lot of other areas we perhaps have not seen. 273

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What I'm saying to you is that this commission is a turning point in the history of Chattanooga. It is so because it means that the city has officially decided that the way people live in this city is what really matters as to whether or not it is a growing, constructive, and a healthy city.

And so I return to the statement that it is in the area of human relations that this commission must make its greatest contribution.

Last November Carl Moore spoke to this group and said:

The way to effect change in the community is to bring together diverse groups and to encourage lasting relationships among those groups.

And then he went on to say:

Start conversations between odd couples. A community is healthy when odd couples talk to each other. 290