



Mandela Washington Fellowship Summit

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Leadership for the Future: Resilience and Inclusion

Plenary Congressional Welcome – Karen Bass Transcript

Speaker

- Karen Bass, U.S. Representative, California

Session Transcript

Well hello everyone! To the very first virtual meeting of the Mandela Washington Fellows, let me just say that I have been a champion of the YALI program from day one. Over the years, I have had the honor every single year of greeting you; this is the first time I greet you virtually, and you know what? I hope it's the last time I greet you virtually! Next year, I will look forward to seeing the class of YALI Fellows; maybe many of you will come back again and we will meet in person.

I have had the opportunity to meet with you when you've come to the United States, and I've had the opportunity to meet with you in many countries in Africa. As a matter of fact, every time I go to the continent—and you should know that I try to go every chance I get—no matter where I am, I always meet YALI Fellows. And what I think is so great about it is that not only do you get the experience of coming here—and of course we think that's great; I do look forward to the day that you're in Los Angeles, California, because that's where I'm from—but I like the fact that you have an opportunity to meet with each other. People from one side of the continent, from East Africa, meeting folks from West Africa and Southern Africa, and you build relationships that I hope becomes lifelong relationships, and it's just wonderful.

I consider myself a lifelong community activist. I grew up in a very tumultuous time, not just in the United States but around the world—post-civil rights movement, in the middle of the Vietnam War—where I protested the policies of my government. I protested in the United States to free Nelson Mandela and to stop U.S. engagement in southern Africa – not just South Africa, but the liberation movements in southern Africa. And I looked forward to the day when I would actually have the resources to go to Africa on my own. That didn't come until much later in my life, long after Nelson Mandela was freed, but at least I had the opportunity to travel to the continent.

For many years, I worked really trying to further the social justice movement in the United States – whether it was fighting against racism, or racial profiling from police, or fighting for economic opportunities for African Americans. All of those issues I was involved in many, many years before I ever envisioned that I would have an opportunity to run for office. But I was really excited in 2011 when I did have the opportunity to run to Congress, because it allowed me to work on both domestic issues and foreign policy issues. And then, of course, the number one area of the world I wanted to



focus on was Africa. So I was selected to serve on the Foreign Affairs Committee. And due to the unfortunate and very tragic death of an icon from the U.S. Congress, Donald Payne – when he passed away, I became the head Democrat on the Subcommittee on Africa. And so, now it allows me to travel to the continent a lot. And my emphasis on working on Africa issues is to change the way our country views the continent of Africa.

I joke sometimes and I say that a lot of Americans think that Africa is a *country* and that I always delight in telling people that you could fit the continental United States on the continent of Africa three times, and people are shocked to realize how big the continent is; the fact that there's over 50 countries. And so, to me, getting our U.S. policy, but also the U.S. public, to see Africa as a partnering continent and not as a continent that is always in need. As is often said in the African Union: “trade not aid.”

What I have found over the years is that I think a lot of people, in terms of some of our policies, also look at the continent of Africa and the people of Africa very similar to how people in inner-city America is viewed, oftentimes, for example, in my district: I represent south-central Los Angeles, and that is known for, unfortunately, a lot of violence, a lot of gang activity, a lot of drug trafficking. But south-central Los Angeles is much, much, much more than that. And those folks, like myself, who is from that community, we understand the assets that are there. We understand the beauty of the community and the beauty of the people, and I look at Africa the same way.

It's--people just see a war or a conflict or a coup, and that's not what I see. I see people and culture and countries that are peaceful that have challenges – like everywhere. But I want our policy to be aligned as a partnership. And so that's one of the reasons why I love the YALI program so much, is because YALI is about building a partnership with the United States, building relationships with people in the United States where we're equal. It's not about charity, it's not about “Africa is nothing but countries involved in problems,” but it's about a real partnership between two peoples in different sides of the world.

Obviously, my affinity to Africa is because of my ancestors, who I don't know who they are or where they came from, like most African-Americans; that's why a lot of African Americans claim the entire continent. I did do my DNA, so I know some of my ancestors were from the country of Cameroon, but I don't even know much about my ancestors in the United States, my ancestors that were enslaved – I know that they *were*, I don't know *who* they were, I don't know *where* they were enslaved. And so, one thing that African-Americans struggle with is the lack of our history, and that's something that is very different, obviously, if you were born and raised on the continent.

So, I wish you well, I hope you have a wonderful Fellowship, the Mandela Washington scholars. Again, I look forward to seeing you in public next year, and then maybe before then I'll see you on the continent of Africa. Thank you so much for giving me the opportunity to speak with you today.