

**Martin Luther King Breakfast
Cleveland, Mississippi
January 19, 2008**

**Thomas C. Dorr
Under Secretary for Rural Development**

Good morning. Thank you, for that very generous introduction. It is truly a privilege to be with you today. We are gathered this morning to honor the memory of a great American ... a brave man ... and a great leader.

As we do so, we should remember that Dr. King didn't march alone. The civil rights revolution of the 1960's was the work of many people. Very possibly, some may be with us this morning. Dr. King was not the only person who put his life on the line, and he was not the only martyr.

Much larger numbers participated in humbler ways ... some by marching ... some by their votes ... and in the passage of time, many millions more by the slow, quiet change of attitudes and habits ... and that ultimately is where the victory is to be won.

It is important therefore that we not reduce large historical events to the biography of a single man. But it is also important to recognize that

there are times when single individuals make contributions of extraordinary importance. The 1960's were such a time, and Dr. King was such a man. It is appropriate that we honor him today.

Dr. King was 39 ... still a young man ... when he was assassinated. Had he lived, he would have been 79 this past Tuesday. None of us, of course, can speak for him today. But it is fair to presume, were he with us this morning, that he would be gratified by some ... and disappointed by others ... of the developments of the past 40 years.

How he would assess the balance ... what kind of report card he would issue on us and on the 40 years that have passed since 1968 ... is an interesting question. It is, however, a question that we will have to wait to ask ... until we catch up to him, as sooner or later all of us will.

But in the meantime, it's also a question we would do well to ask ourselves. Time moves on. The world changes. The Voting Rights Act and Civil Rights Act ... great legislative battlegrounds half a century ago ... are now irrevocable landmarks.

But those historic statutes, as we all understand by now, were not just the end of Jim Crow and legal segregation. They were also the beginning of a very different, and in some respects even more difficult, task ... the task of extending the full promise of America to all.

I believe that Dr. King, had he lived, would have continued as a leader in that crusade. And I believe that all of us here today are therefore carrying on his legacy in a very real and very important way.

Our task today is challenging because it is not just a matter of striking down an old law or passing a new one. It is a matter of reconstruction and renewal ... something that has to be accomplished one person, one job, one community, one school at a time.

From that perspective, what you are doing here is very important. It may not make the headlines. Most “roll up your sleeves and get to work” projects never do.

But the truth is, this kind of initiative changes lives ... and in the end that’s more important than all the speeches combined.

[PAUSE]

There are different ways to get involved. There are many ways to make a difference. The project that we have gathered this morning to support, “Academics Count Too,” focuses on one of the most if not the most important...that will open doors and increasing opportunity for the next generation.

This is a universal issue. I don’t care if you live in the city or the country, the north or the south, or if you’re rich or poor. We live in a world that is increasingly competitive, increasingly interconnected, and in which the returns to education are large and growing larger.

We also live in a world of extraordinary new opportunities, and these opportunities increasingly will depend on education.

Nowhere is this more true than in rural America. Rural isolation is becoming a thing of the past. Distributed computing is wiring all of us into the global commons. More and more jobs can be done just about anywhere. Rural communities can provide quality health care and better

schools. Renewable energy is emerging as the greatest new opportunity for wealth creation in rural America in our lifetimes. Without question, a new day is dawning in rural America, and the future is bright.

I know that you, as leaders in Bolivar and the surrounding counties, are committed to seizing these opportunities. At USDA Rural Development, that is our mission. We live it 24/7.

For most of us, it's personal. We are one of the most decentralized agencies in the federal government. Most of our staff is in the field. We live as well as work in rural America ourselves. So this is a commitment we share with you. We are in fact your partners. We are partners because we are neighbors.

I may be from Iowa, not Mississippi, but that isn't really important. Bolivar County is rural. The Mississippi Delta is predominately rural. This is farm country. And I'm a lifelong farmer from Marcus, Iowa, a thriving metropolis of 1,100 people in northwest Cherokee County.

Now, I know that there are differences. Cleveland, Mississippi, for one thing, is a lot bigger and more cosmopolitan than Marcus. We do have a

stoplight ... I don't want you to think we're unsophisticated ... but we are pretty small. Cleveland in fact is bigger than all of Cherokee County. We grow corn, soybeans, and hogs. We like to think of ourselves, in the State of Iowa, as the ethanol capital of America. We have four seasons ... take it from me, as a lifelong Iowan, this balmy, Spring-like weather that you call "winter" doesn't really qualify.

Or I could talk about football, but I don't want to make the Ole Miss and Cowboys fans feel bad.

But there are a lot more similarities than differences. One of the most important is the challenge facing small rural communities ... All I am really pointing out ...whether it's in Iowa or Mississippi or California or Pennsylvania ... in seizing the opportunities of the new global economy.

The opportunity I submit is real ... we call it the Rural Renaissance ... and we are excited to be your partners in making it happen.

I was last in this neighborhood this past August. The last two years we've done something new, a Rural Opportunity Tour, in cooperation

with the Farm Foundation. This is a week on a bus designed to get community and rural development leaders out of their offices and visiting some truly remarkable success stories that will probably never make the newspapers outside their home counties.

Two years ago, we looped through the tri-state area where Minnesota, South Dakota, and Iowa come together. That's my neck of the woods. It was a great trip. It rearranges your thinking about what is possible in rural America today when you visit a place like JTV Manufacturing in Sutherland, Iowa, which is a town of 600 people.

JTV is a high-tech metal fabrication shop. Everything is computer controlled. They take orders over the internet, cut by laser, and if you're in a rush, ship the next day for overnight delivery.

20 years ago, that kind of business didn't exist anywhere in the world. 10 years ago, you might have done it in a handful of major industrial centers. Today you can do it in an Iowa cornfield ... provided you've got a broadband connection, UPS service, and an entrepreneur with the skills to make it work.

This year the Rural Opportunity Tour home-ported in Memphis. From there we traveled to Viking Range in Greenwood ... visited with the Delta Council in Stoneville ... crossed the river to Helena ... and spent a day in Bolivar, Tennessee.

At every one of these stops ... without exception ... there is a remarkable range of activity underway. There is new hope. There is new opportunity. There are new jobs and growing communities.

- Viking of course is a world class industry leader, home-grown right here in the heart of the Delta. It shocks people in Washington and New York to learn that Viking's home is the Mississippi Delta. But you and I already knew that folks in New York and Washington have a blind spot about rural America. We can help educate them.**
- In Bolivar, there's a new farmers' market, plans for downtown renovation, development of new recreational facilities, and an**

inspiring spirit of cooperation among community, business, and government leaders to keep that community moving ahead.

- **In Helena, one can point to the Delta Bridge Project, the Helena Health Foundation, the Kipp School, and the Delta Cultural Center. USDA Rural Development is a proud partner in all these projects.**
- **Closer to home ... literally just a few weeks ago, we announced funding for Seyah Hospice Care in Inverness [Sunflower County] and for a new fire truck and emergency response equipment right here in Bolivar County.**

Statewide since 2001 we've invested more than \$2 billion in rural Mississippi in infrastructure, affordable housing, community facilities, and businesses.

We're here this morning to encourage and assist students ... so let me draw particular attention to our Distance Learning and Telemedicine Program, through which -- since 1994 -- we've invested almost \$10

million in 28 projects across Mississippi to help schools, hospitals, and clinics provide state-of-the-art online services.

Many of those investments have been in the Delta, including one right here in Bolivar County, in 2004. That helped the North Bolivar School District provide 11 schools and two hub sites with interactive videoconferencing systems to enhance a wide range of web-based instructional opportunities. This is typical of how the DLT program can help rural communities step up in class.

But in the final analysis, it's not the federal dollars that make the decisive difference. The dollars help -- don't get me wrong about that.

But as one travels around rural America, you can't help but notice the diversity ... and that includes communities that are struggling as well as those that are successfully reinventing themselves for the 21st century.

Our programs are available to all of them. We don't redline anyone in rural America. We can help, and we are eager to help.

But very clearly, the key ingredient is YOU. It's leadership and your vision in the community. It's rural business leaders, rural lenders, and rural residents who are committed and stepping up to take their own futures in their own hands.

Yes, this is a farming area. But net farm equity has more than doubled in the last 10 years to more than \$2 trillion. Don't let anyone tell you that rural America doesn't have the potential financial resources to compete.

This is the age of the internet. This is transformative. If JTV can succeed in Sutherland and Viking Range in Greenwood, rural communities can clearly hold their own in intensely competitive markets. That's a new thing, and it's a great thing. Collaboration, regional planning, and commitment.

Similarly, with tools like our Distance Learning and Telemedicine Program, don't let anyone tell you that rural schools or rural hospitals can't compete. We're ready to work with you to help make them first rate.

The tools are available. And I know the talent is here. The commitment is here. It's in this room.

We are gathered today to support an academic program that helps students prepare for and take college entrance examinations. That's one very important piece of the puzzle. But it doesn't end there.

These young people are our greatest resource. But once you've helped them succeed academically, the question is how many of them will come back? When I graduated from college, I was one of the very few in my class ... I think perhaps the only one ... who came back to Marcus to a family farm.

That loss of the next generation has been the story of rural communities for too many years ... and the flip side of it has too often been an indifference to education in rural communities that haven't been able to offer serious opportunities to highly educated young people.

That's what we must change. Academics Count Too is helping to change it at the front end. And with your help, we will work together in Bolivar

**County ... in Washington, Sunflower, and Leflore counties ... and
across the Delta ... to build the new world of opportunity for which Dr.
King marched more than 40 years ago. Let's finish the job. Thank you.**