

## **KeyNote Address by Sophia Bekele**

### **2014 Young African Leadership Symposium (YALS) City University of New York (CUNY), John Jay College of Criminal Justice at 899 10th Ave, New York, NY 10019 “Standing on the Shoulders of Giants Our Past. Our Present. Our Future”**

*Greetings to you, Distinguished Guests, my African Sisters and Brothers, all protocols observed.*

*It is always a pleasure to come to New York, the big Apple. We are at City University of New York. The largest public university in the United States. I did not know that. I am quite impressed. How do we pronounce CUNY?.*

*So you invited me to do a Keynote. Then you assigned me to a 30 minutes job. How CUNY (cunning) is that (Joke). No worries, it was my pleasure. To me, there is no pundit in between us, it is me, you and the future of Africa.*

*Please also say hello to my associates, your African sisters who are here as my guest and excited to listen to you.*

*Let me tell you why I accepted your invite, because it is not always that we accept invitations. I accepted because of your Leadership TEAM - The Council of Young African Leaders'. I was contacted by your Co-Founder, a SHE, which I always take a note. Then read her background online. Her journey from Africa to US was simply ASTONISHING and now, her efforts to bridge the divide between the two Continents. And then I checked all of YOU ORGANISERS listed on your site. I was very proud of your achievement and what you want to do. You are all amazing. I wanted to support you. – That is the honest truth. Your program's theme, “Standing in the Shoulder of Giants” Our Past. Our Present. Our Future”- absolutely important and inspiring topic.*

*For those who are attending this forum, some of the questions in your minds must be - when I get out in the real world, what contributions would I make to Africa? Would I change the world like the Giants of Africa have done? and who will be my guiding light?*

*Therefore, I am very HUMBLLED & HONORED to be invited by the organizers of this forum and have a conversation with you, - the future leaders of Africa - to speak to the topics you laid out, my own thoughts and also experiences from working in the African Continent, and to hear your questions and concerns.*

*Your first question “What are some of the lessons we can learn from Africa's giants and how can these lessons guide our journey to moving Africa forward?”*

*Africa's Giants went through the toughest times; There were many impediments that included little resources, lack of awareness, a formal education, rule of law that supported their views, and the fact that Africa was still really disconnected from the world.*

*From the African Giants we celebrate can learn resilience, patience, persistence. Despite the meager resources they were able to rally support and with their charismatic confidence they were able to move mountains.*

*I call this the “staying power”. With all that we have to offer this world, we have to learn to stay the course. I was educated in America like you, (my undergrad was at SFSU – Let us give hand for State University) so I can’t help but also learn from some of the Giants right here in the US. At the beginning of this year, I recall picking up one of leadership books from the airport and saw this quote from US President Theodore Roosevelt - a great leader and also a great fighter and a fan of boxing.*

*I was so inspired by what he said and what we were enduring at our organization (DCA) – so I wrote an entire commentary from it for our Company’s New Year’s Newsletter and titled it the “ARENA Issue”. He was speaking on staying the course.*

*"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles; or where the doer of the deeds could have done them better. The Credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena; whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, and spends himself in a worthy cause; who at best, knows in the end the triumph of high achievement; and who, at worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat."*

*So, you will never know you will win if you don’t stay the course. I am staying the course in my Body Combat Class (same as boxing)–because I know I am going to burn 750 calories in one hour of a fight vs. 300 in my cycle machine. That is about 1300 punches to your opponent – should be hard for them to get up from the floor;) How many like Body Combat here, is a great sport?*

*There is a saying - Life is 10% what happens to you and 90% of how you react to it. Therefore, stay the course with your goals, there are no short cuts to your causes. The African Giants did.*

*We don’t always have to look for our Giants elsewhere as well; we can also find them close to home. Our fathers, mothers, uncles, Chieftains of our villages, are all great examples. My own Giant was my belated Father Bekele Eshete - bless his soul.*

*A very prominent and respected businessman, who moved mountains with the limited resources his country Ethiopia, offered. He was a serial entrepreneur who built many businesses. His last venture before he died was building the first even Private Bank and Insurance companies in Ethiopia, which remains one of the largest and also most successful financial Institutions today. Most of my Father’s adult life was spent during Communist era, where private sector was seen as the Axis of evil. Despite all the roadblocks, my Father is well known and respected for surviving three regimes in governments and prevailed with all his undertakings in business. He was born during in the Feudal System - Emperor Haile Selassie, survived the 20 years Communist rule that followed, and then the current government which I call a developing democracy and economy. Now, I have learned so many things about being in business and survival from him, particularly those attributes I mentioned above resilience, patience, and persistence.*

*So while we stay the course like our Giants have, how we move forward is by pushing the envelope: PUSH as in (Persist Until Something Happens)*

*Let me share with you my personal experience when I first started my Entrepreneurship, just to illustrate,*

*After I broke off from Corporate; I set up an IT company in US and invested in another with my Father in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Six months after my arrival in the business scene, I won my first multimillion dollar competitive international contract. Take note of our society then, it was in early 2000, IT contract ( a man’s world), the largest ever in the County (Capability to be tested) and by a Women (Unheard of). Societies noticed. When my proud father asked how I did it, in light of the complexities involved as it was one of a kind tender in the country - I told him, Dad it is about value*

*proposition - the Client wanted a turn-key solution for a large scale systems integration contract - meaning a SINGLE company must handle the supplied and implementation. So my California Company put together the procurement requirement from US and our local company handled service delivery. I used a partnership model on both sides.*

*Such Business model bringing together the competition (as competitors competed and were not used to working together) and putting together a solution in such Nation Building Projects was unheard of at the time, so it was a “disruptive” business model, but it worked,. It was a simple transaction, yet it met the requirement of a complex implementation. Eventually, we learned managing the Client was even harder than managing the project, It was difficult for them to adapt to the new economy. Despite, we commissioned the project successfully.*

*Since, there were many ventures my various star-ups have accomplished and pioneered in Africa and the US, in the field of ICT, internet, social media and Corporate Governance, including our very successful and famous pan-African effort on .africa domain name.*

*We all know that most Silicon Companies start in their garages and succeed with disruptive models of winning Clients.*

*The moral of this story is twofold. One is yes, we need to learn to stay in the Arena like the Giants did, but what would help us move into our journey to the future is to continuously PUSH the envelop – (Persist, Until Something Happens)*

*Our World in most ways is different - I guarantee you, yours will also be different than where I was operating the time, and so will the next generation. We live in a free world where each person has an opportunity to express themselves, innovate and really disrupt the world with your ideas.*

*Individuals and institutions are more receptive now to provide resources to expand on innovative minds that are seeking to change the world. We have the internet as a global resource to advance our continents and origins. We have to continually think of smart ways to change the world and make it a better place. What is good for the Goose is good for the Gander.*

*Let me also give Country experiences. Look at Kenya, a Country now with the highest in ICT Spectrum. Kenya was among the first countries in Africa to launch the Submarine undersea cable and this really disrupted the regions with connectivity. This catalyzed several other sectors; the first country to introduce Mpesa a mobile money platform that is now being launched in Europe. Over Ksh2 billion is transacted on M-PESA daily. [how many Kenyans in audience?] Nigeria is another country which recently rated as the biggest economy in Africa, the first also to introduce smart identification cards in Africa. [how many Nigerians?] Ethiopia is also on the rise now and has been one of the fastest growing economies, and I am a proud Ethiopian.[any of my people here?].*

*The operative word for what would move Africa is CHANGE. So we all need to PUSH the envelop – (Persist, Until Something Happens)*

*I was recently quoted on media saying “Change is Controversial”, therefore those who prepare to be in a position to lead change, should also have Courage to pursue it. “Courage is the first of human qualities - because it is the quality which guarantees the others”. – This is a quote from Aristotle. Thomas Jefferson also said "One man with courage is a majority." I am sure Mandela and all those African Giants we celebrate had courage to do what they did.*

*We must change to progress. I come from a very conservative culture of Ethiopia, a combination of aristocracy and strict norms influenced by religion. I have challenged many things on the status quo*

*when I got back as a Diaspora African and I have won many of my battles, be it in business, cultural norms and even influenced my own parents to think differently. You may not win them all, but there is nothing called following the old rules and winning change. One must change the rules for change to happen. So be fearless with your causes. What does not kill you makes you stronger. Also – it does not mean you are lonely when you are alone.*

***You also asked “What is the role of our generation to assure that we do not repeat the mistakes of the past?”***

*Here I am going to talk about the Power of Hindsight and Renewed Leadership*

*Our Generation have the opportunities and the freedom that did not exist during the times and struggles of these celebrated Pan-Africanists. Our role now is more profound since we have the power of hindsight. We have enough data and history (at a snap of our fingers I might add, because most information is online, is effortless to get it) we are able to learn from the mistakes and challenges of our fore fathers.*

*From there, we devise better ways to serve and solve the issues that exists today such as corruption, bad governance, health etc... Our generation has the power to promote freedom of ideas, innovate and be accountable, ethical and transparent, to forge leadership that is keen on every small detail. It is really in building lasting foundations that we can prepare for a better future, it is your chance to chart a new path, without reinventing the wheel so that future generations can appreciate our input.*

*On renewed leadership - I see most organizations, making a mistake of staffing their Boards and oversight committees with individuals that they deem are “Respectable” by their peers or public or industry etc.. and not based on their competency in governance.*

*I have been in the governance business since I started my career so I know. Government are also worst in these areas, as they populate themselves with those who support them. As much as you will not hire a lawyer to do your accounting and vice versa, you should not bring people to your boards because you trust them only, (well integrity is a great character), but can they do the job, can you trust them to give you an independent opinion or qualified opinion when problems arise?*

*So be it the small business you are starting, working within a corporation or government, the principles of governance/ independence is extremely critical. Transparency International has categorized that placing people that are incompetent in their jobs as part of corruption. That is part of Nepotism. It is a big sign of failure of governance and it reflects a bad leadership. I quote another African music Giant and also a freedom fighter, Bob Marley that befit this, “You can fool some people sometimes but you can’t fool all people all the time”.*

*We must invest in training leaders from a very young age, the best leaders of our time have been given a chance to drive change in their own levels such as the one you are doing now. Leaders like the US President Obama started in University. It is unheard of to have young Heads of State in Africa.*

*Therefore, let me sum up on the power of hindsight and renewed leadership, by what Jomo Kenyatta, first president of Kenya, one of the Giant you listed said "Our children may learn about the heroes of the past. Our task is to make ourselves the architects of the future."*

*I also want to say few words on Continuous Education, a very important subject*

*One of the Giants, surprised to see not included in your intro and am going to have a serious conversation with you the organizers off-line, is Emperor Haile Selassie, a Pan Africanist and one who fought for African liberation, said in his University Graduation address (2 July 1963), that*

*“Education is a means of sharpening the mind of man both spiritually and intellectually”; “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” Aptly put by President Nelson Mandela on this subject “No country can really develop unless its citizens are educated.” I recently twitted also on an article I read on Empress Taitu, who was the wife of [Emperor](#) Menelek II of Ethiopia (1889–1913). I was so impressed with her pioneership of education. She made it mandatory for all girls to be educated and later on founded the first Girls school in the country.*

*Yours and our generation is blessed with magnificent tools such as the internet which I have been passionate about. Such tool has opened a new channel for education and income generation and it is therefore something we must use to advance our daily endeavours.*

*How many know that September 8 is International Literacy Day. Well it is, and on this year’s Huff Post - a news blog that is started by an amazing women Ariana Huffington, - in observation of this day– a magnificent saying “A Readers Lives A thousand Lives before He dies... The man who never reads lives only one.” So keep reading. You will enrich your mind and Soul.*

***The last question you have asked is how are we using our own gifts, talents, and ideas, to contribute to the continuous development of Africa?***

*Do you know about “The Parable of the Talent?” originally from the Bible, Matthew 25:14-30 . Now you ask me about African Giants, they have learned most of their lessons from oldest books such as the Bible, where there were also not formal education, they passed on key thoughts to the next generation through parables. Therefore, few weeks ago, I was just reminded of this “Parable of the Talents” in some discussion or rather with a good friend of mine - Bishop of Botswana Trevor Mwamba. I thought it would be a good one to share. I also read a fantastic Book the Bishop wrote called ‘Dancing Sermons’, which is reputed as an Ah! book. I recommend to you all.*

*The Parable of the Talents is a story about work, success, and wealth. It starts like this: A man decided to go on a long trip who called his servants and entrusted to them his house, his stuff and his money. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. After a nice long trip the master came back and wanted to know what his servants did with his money. The first man with five talents said “I have made five more!” His master smiled and replied, "Great job, good and faithful servant!" Come celebrate with me! Then the man with the two talents said, "I have made two more!" He applauded him the same. Then the man who received the one talent came and told his master, "I know you work hard for your money, so I was afraid to lose any of it. I decided to bury it and keep it safe. Here is your one talent back." The master was not impressed and said, You lazy servant! At the very least you could've taken the money to the bank and you would've at least collected some interest from it." He immediately took the talent away from the man and gave it to the first man who used his money to make more.*

*The moral of the story is - that if you use your special gifts and abilities, and keep doing these things you are good at, you will be entrusted with more. There is no silver bullet to success. It is only when your preparation meets opportunity.*

*As students with the privileges you have now, it is your opportunity to innovate and use your talents and gifts in whatever area of study or career you want to take in life, poise yourself in a strategic manner that you can create jobs rather than look for jobs, to build institutions that can change the face of the future, just like Silicon Valley is spawning startups daily. It is also our duty to find ways to use the vast untapped resources within Africa to create home made solutions. We have opportunities in technology, Energy, Culture and Art among others. That was the vision of our Giants.*

*One of modern Giant for me is Tony Elumelu from Nigeria, also a good colleague. Elumelu turned one simple struggling Bank in Nigeria to a PanAfrican success in less than a 10 year period. An amazing accomplishment by any measure. Nigerians have large visions and they do it so well. His philosophy behind “Africapitalism”, a term he coined and says it is not Capitalism with an African twist, but it is a rallying cry for empowering the private sector to drive Africa's economic and social growth. A vision that was buried in Africa for so long due to socialist /communist regimes we have so experienced. Hmm his vision coincides with mine and makes me wiggle... Not the wiggle of Jason Derulo;)*

*Finally, I do not have much time to cover the subject on women, which I am passionate about. But this has to be said. Women represent over 50% of the African continent and they have many gifts and talent and not utilizing them is also missing over 50% of the population's talent. Women are rising and statistic show in the next 20 years most businesses will be owned by women. When the struggle for African freedom, identity, and self-reliance is considered, the focus is often on the brave and courageous men. Little attention is devoted to the African women who made vital contributions in the fight. Empress Taitu's contribution to governance and nation building is unequaled from her male counterparts. I have come to know the famous name of the Capital city of Ethiopia, “Addis Ababa” – namely New Flower - was named by her. Historically African women have been the pillar of strength throughout Africa and the Diaspora. Without examining the contributions made by African women throughout the ages, the full story of the African experience and struggle cannot be told.*

*So for those women in this room, have hope and use your talents. When the going gets tough and/or the men treat you like you should only be seen and not heard, pin your ears to these two songs - a must have in your play list: “Can't hold US down” - by Christina Aguilera and “Girls Run the World ” - by Beyonce: These women got your back. Let us give a hand for all the women in this room.*

*In conclusion - The Council of Young African Leader's - your mission and vision, as you said it yourself “is to inspire the next generation of African leaders to cultivate awareness and action, and also to being called to lead the continent of Africa to its greatest era yet”. Therefore, I call upon you all of you Africans to do just that. There is a huge brain drain in key skills to advance our continent. You the African Diaspora are the Hope for Africa. Fight for your identity as an African - Let no one define you but you. You are the next generation of Leaders, Game Changers, Change Agents - go and do something for Africa.*

*There were many ways to have answered the questions you posed for today's forum, but I spoke to you on what is a PRIORITY to Africa. - Therefore, use your talents, do it the right way –practice good governance – no short cuts, stay the course, use the power of hindsight, PUSH - Persist Until Something Happens. Otherwise, your leadership will also suffer and you will be “Swinging from the Chandelier”. I will let you search whose song that is.*

*Please let us also keep those victims of Ebola in our prayers. It is a huge tragedy. Our Continent's future is online.*

*Thank you*

*May God Bless You and May God Bless Africa*