

## **Lt. Gov. Juliana Stratton Inauguration Remarks**

**January 14, 2019**

Thank you all!

As I stand on this stage before you, I cannot start my remarks without first pausing to give honor to an awesome God. A God who has kept me and protected me and sustained me every step of the way...who has called me to the work that I do and has given me a passion for public service. I am humbled and eternally grateful to stand where I do today, and I feel incredibly blessed to be of service to all of you.

Congratulations to all of my fellow Constitutional Officers being sworn in today.

To Judge Adrienne Davis, thank you for administering the oath of office.

To evangelist Johgina Densmore thank you for speaking a blessing over me this morning at the prayer service.

To my love Bryan, thank you for your steadfast support and for taking my hand every, single day and praying over me. I am so proud of the man that you are and to have you by my side, and without a doubt, you have made this journey so much easier and I love you.

To my remarkable daughters, Tyler, Cassidy, Ryan and Mackenzie, I stand in awe of your inner and outer beauty and the many ways you are able to authentically express unwavering love and support. I know the sacrifices you also have made for me to be here today and I appreciate you and I love you all so much.

And I've been waiting to say this: To Governor JB Pritzker...I am so honored to serve as your partner as you lead the great state of Illinois and I am grateful for your vision to lift up every community and serve every resident of our state. And I can't think of anyone else that I'd want in your place as we get ready to roll up our sleeves and get to work. And to know

that MK will be at your side as our fantastic First Lady... and Teddi and Donny to round out our first family, only makes this journey even sweeter.

And to all of you who are gathered here today for this momentous occasion—elected officials and other colleagues, family, friends, my special group of Sister-friends, to my Jack and Jill and Link sisters, to the illustrious women of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated, and to so many I have met along the way even those who are supporters as well as those who may have hoped for a different outcome—to all of you...I look forward to working with you, listening to your perspectives, and partnering with you to better the lives of all Illinoisans.

I stand here today on the shoulders of my ancestors whose blood runs through my veins and who understood the principles of collective responsibility in community-building. See, before she died in 1983, my maternal grandmother, Velma Slaughter, wrote out the family history for her grand-children and it has meant so much to me, that it was inserted in the Bible upon which I laid my hand this a few moments ago. My grandmother wanted me and all of her grandchildren to know that we come from a line of people who are community builders—from the ground up. That my ancestors were never solely concerned with just their own lineage, but were committed to building a community where their neighbors, and those across the street and around the corner and across town could also succeed.

For over 35 years, I've read my grandmother's words and longed to know what life was really like for my great-great grandfather, William Stephens and his twin brother, Daniel, who were born into slavery and whose story she told. And sometime after President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation and my ancestors were set free, the Stephens brothers were given a large plot of land in Mississippi by the man that once owned them. William and Daniel Stephens married two sisters, one being my great-great grandmother, Margaret, and they continued to purchase adjoining land and rented it out to tenants.

These brothers—formerly enslaved—were industrious and continued to build this community—they farmed the land, growing cotton, vegetables and fruit and tended to livestock and poultry. And, they helped to create every institution that was needed for their tenants to live full lives: a church...a school...a general store...a post office. These two brothers—my ancestors—understood the value of community, and recognized that in lifting up others, it creates a legacy of opportunity for generations to come.

This past summer, I took a short journey to Stephenville, Mississippi—where the land was given and named after my great-great grandfather and his brother—with an aching desire to walk upon the soil of those that came before me and whose legacy I seek to honor every day of my life. The trip had spiritual implications, as I wanted to reconnect with my own roots in the rural experience at a time that I was traveling the rural areas of our state and meeting so many people and listening to the stories of those whose lives were so very different than mine on the South Side of Chicago.

I discovered the school house that my ancestors help build, and I immediately connected to why we are fighting to ensure that every child has access to quality education starting at the earliest years all the way through what should be affordable and accessible opportunities in vocational or higher education.

I discovered the church that my ancestors help found. And I immediately connected to why we prioritize rebuilding and strengthening human services in our state, understanding that we must be compassionate towards those in need and demonstrate benevolence to the most vulnerable in our state.

I discovered the Stephenville Market—a small store that had all of the essentials and seemingly the only business in town. And I immediately connected to why entrepreneurship and economic opportunity and inclusion must be guiding values for strengthening our state's often forgotten communities and, thereby, strengthening all of Illinois.

My trip to Stephenville, Mississippi was powerful. And it centered me for the work that lies ahead. See, I had to reach back to my past to better understand my future. To be reminded that community-building is not done principally through policy-making or legislation or proclamations. Community-building is done when we refuse to let our narrow self-interests be the sole guiding force, and instead put them on hold long enough to listen to someone who has an opposing idea, to break bread with someone whose circumstances seem vastly different than our own, and to commit to working side-by-side, even when it's hard, to make life better not just for our own...but for those around us and, mostly, for generations that following us.

On December 3, 1818, Illinois became the 21<sup>st</sup> state. 200 years later—with the D-N-A of my formerly enslaved great-great-grandfather, William Stephens, as part of MY genetic make-up—I am proud to stand before you as our state's first black Lieutenant Governor.

The historic nature of my inauguration is not lost on me. It is also not lost on me that in 2019—having just celebrated our state's bicentennial and entering our third century— that we are still a nation—and a state—of “firsts”, that there are still doors of opportunity that have been closed for far too many for far too long, and that there are still too many spaces in our democracy where what was meant to be a “representative government” simply fails to be a representation of us all. We have to change that. And while progress is being made, albeit too slowly, it is abundantly clear that we will never realize our full potential if we fail to embrace our interconnectedness and broaden our sense of community. I cannot be my best self if I am not working for you to be your best self. We simply cannot be our best selves as Illinoisans, if we don't proactively and intentionally seek ways to listen to one another other, problem-solve together, and highlight our commonalities more than we seek out our differences.

As Illinoisans—though we number nearly 13 million— in many ways we are, in fact, one community. And while this statewide community includes

urban and suburban and rural...while it encompasses tech firms and manufacturing, small businesses, non-profits and family farms...while it's made up of different backgrounds and ages, faiths and political affiliations, races, nationalities and ethnicities, gender identities and physical abilities—this is OUR community. We belong here. We must look out for each other. And we must work to build OUR community...together.

Illinois, in the Spirit of my ancestors—William and Margaret Stephens, Henry and Janie Wiggins, Wilbur and Velma Slaughter—and my parents and those who have parented me, Henry and VK, Martin and Gwendolyn, Lindberg and Sammie— I am honored to serve as your Lieutenant Governor. I am more committed than ever before to working on your behalf, fighting for what's right, putting the people of Illinois first, ensuring an inclusive and representative government, and working alongside of all of you to make our community, this Illinois community, the very best that it can be.

Thank you! May God bless each and every one of you, may God bless the state of Illinois and may God bless the United States of America! Thank you.