

Compiled by John Crane, The Register and Bee, Danville, VA

In passionate Averett speech, Stacey Abrams says building community requires trust, imagination, action

Build community out of chaos.

That was the message from former Georgia House of Representatives minority leader and 2018 gubernatorial candidate Stacey Abrams and Averett University on Sunday.

There are three ways to build community out of chaos: trust, imagination and action, Abrams said during a Zoom event to launch Averett's annual America's Sunday Supper in celebration of Martin Luther King Jr. week.

"It will require trust, it will necessitate imagination and it will only be if we take action," she said.

Abrams gave the keynote address on the week's theme, "From Chaos to Community." The title refers to King's last book, "Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?"

Community requires everyone respecting, listening to and learning from one another, but it not easy, Abrams said.

"Community is complicated, community is hard and it is rough, it scrapes against your nerves," she said.

During her speech, Abrams also touched upon the political division in the country, including the storming of the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6 by armed Trump supporters.

"It has reached a fever pitch in the last four years," she said.

The attack came the day after Georgia's runoff election for its two Senate seats in which Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock prevailed over incumbent GOP senators. With those victories, Democrats took the Senate majority.

Abrams' efforts to get out the vote and convince the party to pay more attention to Georgia have been credited with delivering wins for Ossoff and Warnock.

"The entirety of our state, the diversity of our state ... saw themselves as part and parcel of building the next phase of our country," Abrams said.

But the next day, domestic terrorists had stormed the Capitol, she lamented.

"The aftermath of that chaos continues to reverberate," she said.

She said she was sickened by the deaths that resulted from the assault on the federal government, but not surprised. Abrams grew up in Mississippi and saw the same Confederate symbols that were waved in the Capitol Building.

"While I'm sickened and despondent, I'm also hopeful," she said.

Growing up, Abrams learned the value of education from her parents, a shipyard worker and a librarian.

"My mom used to call us the 'genteel poor,'" she said. "We watched PBS and read books."

Education is one thing no one can take from you, Abrams said. "They can never take away what's in your mind," she said.

"A good education was like a set of wings," she said. "We could fly, we could soar."

The second oldest of six children, Abrams also learned about responsibility and community.

As minority leader in the Georgia House of Representatives, Abrams had the responsibility to "bring community out of chaos," working with those who had different viewpoints and to lead others to "policies and politics that we needed."

Building community out of chaos takes trust, she said.

"When you don't have power, sometimes you can borrow it," she said. "If you can build a sense of trust when you ask for things and you need it, sometimes you can get it."

The second way to build community — imagination — enables you to imagine what it looks like, Abrams said.

"We have to imagine that justice is possible," she said. "We have to imagine that racism can be eviscerated."

Often, our political divides can come from a lack of belief that things are possible, she said.

The third way to community is action, she said.

"Volunteerism is where we begin building our community," she said. "The magic occurs when we start to work with other people."

Action also includes voting, she pointed out.

"One of the ways we bring community out of chaos is by casting ballots," Abrams said.

The political divides in Washington and in Richmond are a result of the political divide in ourselves, she said.

"We are the ones who choose who leads us," Abrams said. "If we don't hold them accountable, then that division is on us."

"But if we do those three things, but if we stand together understanding that we are indeed bringing harmony to chaos and humanity to community, then together we know where we can go from here," Abrams said.

Billy Wooten, a Georgia native and executive director of Averett's Center for Community Engagement and Career Competitiveness, summed up the passion in Abrams' speech as soon as she finished.

"Miss Abrams brought us back to church," Wooten said.

The Sunday Supper was a result of a partnership among Averett's CCECC, Danville Community College, Danville Museum of Fine Arts & History, Middle Border Forward, the commonwealth of Virginia, History United and Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.