Remarks delivered by Susie Kay at the National Truancy Prevention Conference

As you know, I am here in my official capacity as the founder and president of the Hoops Dreams Scholarship Fund and to talk a little bit about my many years as a 12th grade American government teacher at H.D. Woodson High School right here in Washington, D.C.

I started Hoop Dreams in 1996 along with friends, some of who are here today, and volunteers who have been so supportive in my initial years in this very unexpected journey of my life as a teacher at H.D. Woodson High School. I was so deeply, deeply inspired by my students, who refused to give up and whom I'm sure, like so may of you, I learned so much more from them than I'm sure they ever learned from me and, in spite of every reason to give up, just didn't see that as an option.

While I was so inspired, I was also deeply frustrated to see so many of their lives and dreams end short and not reach their potential—truly dreams deferred. I came up with an idea after seeing the documentary *Hoop Dreams* about two young people in Chicago who also came from the inner city and very challenging circumstances and, really unlike any of my students, had dreams of playing basketball, but it was a very poignant documentary about these two young men and their spirit and their challenges and the way that they really needed help from the broader community to make those dreams come true.

I am an avid sports fan, which was always a great commonality between the students and I, and I like to talk a lot of stuff to gain some credibility from my students. Sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't, but the one thing we all loved and talked about was sports. So I came up with the idea: "Lets put on a charity three-on-three basketball tournament. It will last for 8 hours on this one day in June of 1996 and we will have goal of raising academic college scholarships for you, my students, and try to connect you in a more formal fashion to local and caring members of the business community."

Well, that 8 hours turned into what is going on 10 years. It is very obvious, I'm sure from just looking at me, that my organization, ironically, had virtually very little to do with basketball, as I once again am straining on my tippy toes, as I always am when I have to speak. What we have everything to do with is bringing people together in finding common bonds, in not letting rivers or bridges or race or economics or differences divide us, and realizing as a people, as a community, and as a country, we do not reach our full potential until we believe in each other's dreams, until we open our hearts, and that we really trust there is good out there. And what better thing to do with this good than to support our young people, particularly growing up in the toughest of circumstances.

When I founded Hoop Dreams, as I noted, I had been teaching halfway through my 13 years—what would eventually become my 13 years at H.D. Woodson High School. For those of you that are not from Washington, H.D. Woodson, which is fondly known as the "Tower of Power," is located in Ward 7, east of the Anacostia River. It is and always has been a 100-percent African American high school. The community that it is located in is full of wonderful, hard-working

people who want the same dreams and aspirations for their sons and daughters, as I am sure all of you do. But in order to really realize those dreams, as we know, as the American Dream tells us, we need an opportunity, we need a shot, we need resources, we need more than just a dream. In this community, there are people day in and day out who are truly still struggling to survive and to overcome obstacles of violence, of lack of economic opportunities, and certainly the lack of the education opportunities that all young people ask for, need, and deserve.

The immediate community where H.D. Woodson is located has at times been dubbed "the killing fields," starting in an article in the *New York Times* in the mid 90s. It had one of the highest homicide rates per capita in the country, particularly at a time when the crack epidemic was raging in this country, as it was in so many urban communities, which is exactly the time that I first stepped foot though the doors and two metal detectors at H.D. Woodson in 1990. Working for over 13 years at H.D. Woodson High school obviously helped me embark on a journey that I was never intended and never planned, but I thank God everyday that somehow I ended up there and didn't stick to what I thought was my original plan when I came to Washington, D.C.

In my past 9 years in my capacity as founder and president of Hoop Dreams, I have seen the same promises and challenges of youth who are disenfranchised and disconnected from so many of the opportunities that are considered more of a given to young people who are from more affluent and more privileged families. These young people work so hard against tremendous odds. Still, overwhelming barriers stand between them and a college education, a career, and a more hopeful life. It is no wonder that their daily pursuits at school can seem hopeless, and helpless, and futile, and so many choose to skip school or drop out all together.

I founded Hoop Dreams to help empower these same young students, these same youth, to keep track, to keep their eyes on the prize of higher education and not lose sight of where they want to go. Our organization is part of a continuum of other programs needed from earlier grades, the various earlier grades, as Secretary Paige said, through early adulthood, to ensure our youth the opportunity to reach their potential. All of us here have contributed in different ways to this whole and are coming together this morning and through this conference, which presents the opportunity for collaboration needed to make a powerful, tangible, and real difference.

Again, I know I am preaching to choir in this room when I say we must do all that we can as a community and as a country to make sure that every single young person, every single one, has the encouragement, the love, the support, the resources, and the guidance to stay in school and ultimately access higher education and other opportunities for personal, career, and life development. The future of our country lies in our ability to help these young people realize their dreams. Their productive and hopeful futures will result in a more promising tomorrow, not just for them, but for all of us.

You probably don't hear enough about the immense and immeasurable difference that you make each day when you go the extra mile, when you go the extra 5 miles, and I know in some of your cases, the extra infinite miles, to make dreams for our students come true. So let me take again an opportunity to thank you on their behalf and continue to on behalf of the young people in your communities. Please don't underestimate for 1 minute the difference you are making in the lives of kids across the country, their families, their neighborhoods, and their communities. Some of my most indelible moments in building this organization, and in my years of teaching at

Woodson in this incredible journey, have been working with educators, with school administrators, to understand the efforts of kids coming from the circumstances that our kids do and the differences their efforts truly make. There are a whole lot of people in inner city schools and in schools across America, as we know, who manage to do so much more with less, and in no way should we point fingers and blame those who are really working hard under the toughest of circumstances. While your tireless work has made a difference in the lives of so many young people, there is still so much more that is needed; and the numbers are harrowing and daunting, and they sure serve as a reminder that in our business complacency is not an option.

In Washington, D.C.'s, public school system, where Hoop Dreams is based, similar to many other school systems in urban communities across the United States, only 49 percent of students make it from 8th through 12th grade. That is less than 50 percent of public school students in Washington, D.C., making it through high school. Contributing to this high dropout rate is a truancy rate in the city that is very, very high. It is approximately 15 percent, particularly in high school, and over the past few years, there is one high school that had a truancy rate of over 50 percent. Again, this is our collective problem to deal with. Everyday that a student is out of school is a missed opportunity to engage that student by whatever means necessary to capture their interest, to cultivate their dreams, to provide the personal connection that is necessary to foster a personal development. Out of school, these young people are destined for trouble, distractions, and bad news. From hanging out aimlessly with peers, to gang involvement, to criminal activity, an overwhelming percentage of our students move quickly from skipping school to more serious criminal and sometimes delinquent behavior.

Whatever the circumstances influencing truancy—drugs, alcohol abuse, misunderstanding or ignorance of attendance policies, poor health, lack of incentive, weak academic skills, a cry for help—addressing these problems requires a coordinated effort from parents, teachers, youth development professionals, nonprofits, and school officials.

Those of us in Washington last year were faced with a harsh eye-opening to the truancy problem when a young man at one of D.C.'s public schools was fatally shot. This young man was a 17-year-old who had been absent for 6 weeks while he waited a transfer to another school last year. He was seeking a transfer because he feared for his life in what he thought were challenging halls of his school. Again, while this is a horrible story, it is our problem, and there is no room for finger-pointing and blame.

At Hoop Dreams, we have created a model that is essential to the success at inner city schools that I realized after my many years of working and living and seeing life through their eyes day in and day out. We work closely with students and partner with high schools and parents and families to address the holistic needs of students to ensure that no student slips through the cracks, that young people know someone believes in them, cares about them, and loves them, and to create and environment that allows young people to stay focused on their goal of a high school graduation and college. By helping students focus on positive options ahead, we help encourage their daily participation in school and in the community around them. As our youth begin to approach high school, we extend our partnerships to include institutions of higher learning to make sure that the gates of higher education are not closed to students who may not have the resources, who are probably the first in their family to go to college and don't have not

only financial resources but a support system that you need to couple whatever financial resources you are able to get. Our hope is to empower young people to find pathways to college, career, and to a rich life by ensuring that the complexities of our educational system and the limitations of our colleges and institutions that are just way too underfunded and way too overextended do not stand in the way of the students' hard-earned dreams.

And for preparing to come before all of you this morning, it is hard to not think about how this ever happened in the first place. And I am very humbled and honored to be able to share some of my stories, the story of Hoop Dreams, and our students. I couldn't help but reflect back upon this path and the moments that lead me to come before all of you right now. I can say like so many things in life, I really am sometimes still amazed how all this happened.

Like so many things, I guess you go back to the beginning, and I was very, very fortunate to be the child of a naval captain, Captain Howard Kay from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He, like many Jewish men, spent his life looking for a nice Jewish girl to marry, preferable from Milwaukee, as he was traveling the world in his military career. Like Hoop Dreams and many unplanned things, he found and married my very, very, very Italian mother, who he met in Ethiopia while he was stationed there to help Hally Salasi rebuild the Ethiopian navy after it was savaged during World War II. A common theme in his work with that Ethiopian navy was perseverance—don't give up no matter how daunting the odds. My dad taught me from an early age that we are all here to serve each other, to serve our community, and to serve our country in whatever capacity we can. And with these two people as my parents, I saw out of the block that amazing and wonderful things that happen when two people who came from such diverging worlds, different cultures,

different continents, different religions, came together and believed in each other. I had a surplus of love and commitment, and didn't realize how lucky I was, and that there are so many kids in this country who are not growing up in that similar situation.

After growing up in Hawaii and moving to Newport, Rhode Island, I came to Washington, D.C., to attend American University to study, of course, political science. I envisioned a very traditional life and career on Capitol Hill and thought it would be exciting to work on national issues like education and trying to create opportunities for others across the country. But I couldn't escape the paradox that is and remains Washington, D.C.: the two Washingtons. Again, divided by a river and a bridge and too often by race and economics, this is a city with all of its hope and all of its potential and all of its dreams and all of its idealism, where people too often still stay disconnected, and communities and neighborhoods blocks away from the nation's capital are not given the opportunity to truly live up to the American Dream.

After working on the Hill, I realized I wanted to teach for 1 year in an inner city high school, teaching my passion, American government. I was sent to H.D. Woodson. I didn't know anything about it. I absolutely got lost on my way there, and I realized that I was somewhere I had never been before, but immediately I could sense the love and the hope and the spirit of these young people, and it was a very, very, very powerful revelation to realize that I was so lucky to be there. While it was very tough personally to be there and very overwhelming, almost frustrating, experience, I kept driving back each morning, as I left there each afternoon determined to never come back again. I didn't want to be one of those people that gave up, that quit, and gave in because it would have been so easy to do.

The bitterness and anger associated with deep racial and economic divides, as I said, were still keeping the people of Washington and again, still too often, the country, at odds. How could it be, again I asked myself, that blocks from the nation's capital, students were almost bereft with opportunities to achieve their dreams through college education. I decided that I wanted to be part of the difference in helping to bridge the gap between disparity and the different communities in the Washington region.

While teaching my students, I realized that I was the first white person that they had ever had a daily relationship with. So we had conversations, brutally honest conversations that extended late into the night about people and their differences and their perceptions. I called upon a very diverse group of friends and asked them to join me in showing my students that there are so many good people out there and if given the chance to believe in them, they would as well. What started out as an effort to bring friends from Capitol Hill into my classroom, like Ari Fleischer, ironically, who just happened to be a neighbor at the time, we began to dispel stereotypes and myths about human beings, and people got to know each other as individuals. From that experience and so many others the students and I faced in that initial year at Woodson, the idea of the tournament came to fruition, and from that day it was safe to say that with an exception of a few months, when unfortunately after that first tournament, that same man, my father, who had inspired me so much, passed away, his spirit and his drive lives on in this organization and 700 students that we have helped send to college. After those few months went by and I wasn't any use to anybody, once again it was my students who put everything into perspective. One of my students, who was a freshman at Moorehouse, sent me a letter and said, "Ms. Kay, get off your

behind, and pull yourself up. Your dad is watching. Put on that tournament again and let's see what happens."

From that day in 1997, and with the help of EDS becoming my founding sponsor, myself and a group of people have not stopped working on this effort literally for a day. We have built an organization, we hope, with respect that understands that trust is something hard-earned and you have to go back and work hard for everyday; that to work effectively with students like ours, you have to be relentless, you cannot take your eyes off the prize, and you really just can't come up for air because their dreams are so important.

We realized that our students needed so much more than money and resources because, as I noted, so many were the first not only in their family to go to college but in their neighborhoods to go to college. And getting them through what can be a very harrowing, convoluted, and complicated college application and college prep process needed a lot of support and a lot of guidance, and you can't do it with money alone, but unfortunately, you can't do it without the money.

We put in place 3-year-long programs that still remain the heart of the Hoop Dreams Scholarship Fund 8 and a half years later: A college prep mentoring program where we have paired now 500 members just like yourself of the local business community from Washington, Virginia, and Maryland with 100 of our students each year, 500 total for the past 5 years. We take them as a group through the college application process, the college prep process, working on financial aid,

working on essays, getting all of these different resources in place and lining up a lot of different pieces you need to get into college, get through the door, and be successful once you get there.

At the core of what we do at our organization through our mentoring program and all of our work remains this deep belief in the power of building a relationship between two individuals and how that strengthens a community. We also run a year-long internship program, where we have paired 200 of our students, and the students that we work with now come from a variety of schools in Washington, D.C.'s, inner city, including still H. D. Woodson and Ballou High School, which is also one of our primary schools that unfortunately has also been in the news a lot these past 2 years because some of the challenges that their young people are facing. Through our internship program, our students get out there in the corporate world, in the business world, in the working world, and understand that you can't get anywhere without hard work. Again, building bridges between diverse and diverging communities.

We also run an SAT prep partnership program and a partnership we built with the Princeton Review. We have been able to help facilitate now nearly 400 students getting a donated $1000 SAT prep course, which shows that it is not a lack of their academics or smarts or their wanting this dream to come true; sometimes, it's the lack of opportunities, because their scores often go up 50 points, 100 points, 200 points, and 250 points, which very much knocks down one of those barriers of getting into college. Where we have now helped send 700 students to college with the combination of the $2.5 million of scholarships and the additional funding that we have raised and need to continue to raise each year to run our programs, we continue to work with the

hundreds of students we have sent to college in a very hands-on, relentless, highly accountable way that is very much built on the mantra of tough love.

I am proud to say that we now have nearly 100 of our initial Hoop Dreams Scholarship recipients graduate from college, including Theodore Branum, who is part of my small but mighty staff, who is actually sitting right there. Of these nearly 100 students, the vast majority, again, are the first in their family to go to college and come from a single parent household, but they understand that the onus is now on them to turn around and empower those behind them. One of the wonderful things that has happened is that some of those students have come back to be mentors in the Hoop Dreams Mentoring Program, now serving as role models to their business community peers right here in the nation's capital.

I know that your speaker yesterday or one of the very great speakers that you have, was Reverend Black, who is the Senate Chaplin and a rear admiral in the U.S. Navy. I saw that he had received the Benjamin Mays award from Moorhouse University, and Benjamin Mays, of course, the great president of Moorehouse University and the mentor to Dr. Martin Luther King, a man whose legacy you all are paying such great tribute and honor to through the work you have chosen. I thought of a quote of Benjamin Mays, and I'd like to share with all of you. "We have only just 1 minute, only 60 seconds in it. Forced upon it, we can't refuse it; we didn't seek it, and we didn't choose it, but it is up to us to use it. We must suffer if we lose it, give account if we abuse it, just a tiny little minute, but eternity is in it."

I thank all of you for your renewed commitment to understanding that every day, and literally every minute, we spend with our young people and our students literally does save their lives in so many ways. I thank you on behalf of all of them. It really was an honor to be in front of you this morning. Thank you.