

Marvin E. Blum  
Acceptance Speech for MCA Annual Award  
April 19, 2016

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First, let me say thank you. I am honored to share this moment with Marcia and Arnie, two of my dear friends.

It also means the world to me that my family is here with me tonight, along with so many of my close friends. I'm standing here tonight and really counting my blessings.

It says a lot about MCA that tonight marks our 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary in Fort Worth. It says that the work we do is important. And it says that this community embraces the work we do.

Like most of us, I'm involved with a number of causes and each of these organizations means a lot to me. But here's why MCA tops my list: MCA brings people together. MCA breaks down barriers that separate us. Today more than ever, we need an organization that champions that mission.

As you've heard, about 11 years ago, we were at an important crossroads when we worked to keep NCCJ alive in Fort Worth.

One year later, we were at another important crossroads. Our long-time Executive Director Emily Trantham retired. There was truly an angel on our shoulders when we found Dr. Cheryl Kimberling to step into that role. During the interviews, I teased with Cheryl about the fact that she and my wife Laurie both came from Memphis, and I said, "There's just something about you Memphis girls." Indeed there is. Tonight, we celebrate not only our 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary, but we celebrate Cheryl's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary as our dynamic Executive Director. Thank you, Cheryl, for bringing your special Memphis magic to MCA.

Like Marcia and Arnie, I've been involved with MCA for a long time. Let me share a couple of my favorite memories from my own MCA journey.

I remember the night we honored Rosie and Mike Moncrief, and I'll never forget Rosie's speech. Rosie made the point that a new-born child's mind is like a blank cassette. For those of you a generation or more below me, a cassette tape was like a CD that you could record on. After the child is born, that cassette starts to be filled with messages, mostly from the child's parents, but later from friends and teachers. Rosie's point was that no one is born a bigot. We learn to hate. But if we can learn to hate, we can also unlearn it. We can fill that tape with new messages to override the old messages. That's exactly what MCA does. One of the key places MCA does that is at Camp CommUNITY.

About a dozen years ago, Emily Trantham approached me with the idea of taking a week off work to be an advisor at Camp CommUNITY, then known as Camp Anytown. My initial reaction was, "No way." How could I possibly take a week off from my law practice to do that? Also, as an older, serious lawyer, how could I possibly relate to a group of cool high school students? I was anything but "cool."

Emily enticed me when she told me that she had invited our daughter, Lizzy, a Camp Anytown alum, to also spend that week at camp as a Camp Counselor. Moreover, Emily told me that she thought

my world view was narrow and I needed the camp experience myself for my own personal growth. Those words stung, but it worked. How could I say no? So, in spite of my resistance, I went to camp for a week.

Let me tell you about the magic that happens at camp.

When I arrived there, I soon learned that my fears were not unique. As the 75 campers got off the bus at camp, I learned that they felt the same trepidations I felt. Most confessed that they didn't really want to come, but they gave into pressure to attend, much like I did. So, picture this scene: 75 nervous teens get off the bus, coming from all kinds of diverse backgrounds (Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, African American, Hispanic, you name it). No one knew the others. They were totally outside their comfort zone and being told that they're going to come together soon as one big family. At that point, no one believed it, and the natural tendency was to look for someone the most like you and separate from the group. I actually felt the same way.

Well, over the next five days, magic happened; for the campers and for me. We were divided into small families called share groups, and when you looked around the group, no one in it looked like you. We did lots of activities in these share groups where you couldn't hide. One girl in my group, Renee, was painfully shy and could hardly speak. Another kid, an African American boy named Julian, was angry and bitter, talked about dropping out of school, and said he didn't want to participate in any of our activities, so at first he stayed off to the side and just observed.

For five days, all the campers, counselors, and adult advisors lived together, ate together, sang together, and did workshops together to gradually open our minds and open our hearts. Gradually, all our inhibitions and fears vanished.

In one activity later in the week, we divided into our own ethnic groups. Mine was the Jewish group. We had nametags to identify each group. For an entire day, you were prohibited from talking to anyone outside your own group. By this point in the week, we had become connected, and let me tell you this separation activity was torture. At the end of the day, when someone finally got the courage to rebel and break the separation rule, everyone followed him. What followed was the most amazing scene of hugging I've ever witnessed. I remember hugging a fellow advisor, an African American woman named Adrienne, like I never wanted to let go.

As camp was coming to a close, at a final candlelight friendship circle, a microphone was passed around. One Hispanic boy named Dustin, said his birthday was approaching and before camp he had no friends to invite, but now a big group from camp was going to celebrate his birthday with him. The angry fellow, Julian, from my share group who didn't want to participate in anything, ended up being one of the stars of our camp talent show. It turns out that Julian was an incredible athlete who left camp determined to pursue an athletic scholarship and go to college.

When the microphone came to Renee, the shy girl from my share group spoke into that mic, loud and clear, about her personal growth while at camp. She had been transformed. Indeed, we all were transformed.

When the mic came to me, I confessed about not wanting to come to camp and shared how nervous I was about connecting with kids their age, especially as a totally un-cool lawyer. What followed was a chorus of cool high school kids shouting, "Marvin, you're cool!" Well, maybe not, but I felt accepted and cool at that moment. I definitely felt loved.

The scene getting on the bus to leave camp couldn't have been more opposite than the scene getting off the bus five days earlier. People say good-bye differently than they say hello. You've never seen such hugging, crying, and connectedness. Camp CommUNITY is life changing.

At camp, we learn that it's easy for people to hate in the abstract. They say things like "I hate all Jews" or "I hate all Muslims." But then when you actually get to know one, you discover that you don't hate that person at all. It makes you question how you can hate people that you don't even know. That's how the process of unlearning prejudice begins.

Everyone at camp committed to return home and carry the messages of acceptance back into their own communities. As the philosopher Voltaire taught, each camper went home to "cultivate his own garden." When my daughter, Lizzy, was a camper, she returned to Trinity Valley School and became the driving force to create a new Diversity Club that still exists today, some 15 years later. In college at NYU, Lizzy took a diversity program called "Hate in the Hallways" into New York public schools.

For me, Camp CommUNITY ignited a passion to serve MCA; a passion that still burns deep within me.

My best friend, Talmage Boston, a lawyer and baseball historian, is here tonight. Talmage uses the story of Jackie Robinson, who broke the color barrier in major league baseball, to describe the kind of ripple effect campers have when they return home. At Robinson's funeral, it was said that "Jackie was a rock thrown in the water, who created concentric circles and ripples of new possibility for others."

Talmage also writes that in the world of prejudice and discrimination, everyone breaks into two groups: insiders and outsiders. Well, let me tell you; at Camp CommUNITY, there are no insiders and outsiders. We're all one.

But that doesn't mean we all speak in the same voice. At Camp, we learn to see our commonalities, but we also learn to appreciate and celebrate our differences.

My daughter Lizzy tells me that in the Jewish religion there's a concept in the Torah called "Symphony of the Stars." Each person in the universe has to sing his own song. When you start singing someone else's notes, it throws everything off balance.

So, I'll close with the words from a song that captures exactly what we do at the Multicultural Alliance:

"If all the world were a concert,  
What a wonderful world it would be.  
The notes we would play may be different.  
And the instruments won't sound the same.  
But every man and his brother  
Would synchronize with one another  
And the splendid blend would always end in harmony."

So I ask you to please join me in supporting MCA. Help us "cultivate a garden" here in Fort Worth and build a community where everyone can make their own kind of music, but we can all live together in harmony.

Thank you.