

INVISIBLE TEARS OF SEMI INVISIBLE AND INVISIBLE CHILDREN

Paul Harris Fellow Awards Dinner

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**Marriott's Frenchman's Reef & Morning Star Beach
St. Thomas
U.S. Virgin Islands**

March 5, 2011

Invisible Tears of Semi Invisible and Invisible Children

It is an honor to be asked to serve as the keynote speaker for the Rotary's Paul Harris Gala. I understand that this is a signature event for this signature organization in the Territory. I am really thankful to be speaking at this Paul Harris Gala. As a lawyer and former law professor, I often strongly suggested in my writings, teaching and speaking that the legal profession is a scared calling and lawyers should be taking the lead in urging the society to place people before profit, justice before process, and relationships above retaliation. Thus, to be asked to serve as keynote speaker at an event named after a lawyer who not only believed in these ideals but created an organization that attempts to embody and cultivate these ideals is a special honor. Paul Harris was a lawyer who founded the Rotary through clients he served and 106 years later, with over a million members worldwide, the motto to place "Service Above Self" still rings true.

The Rotary plays a key role of leadership and service to the Virgin Islands and to the world. The values you embrace and profess are key to creating the type of society and the type of individuals that we desperately need. I have been impressed by the numerous projects that the Rotary and Rotarians support in the Territory.

It is this fundamental principle of service, and this commitment to doing things that benefit others that make this such a special organization. It is the vision and work of Paul Harris and this organization's core belief in the search for truth, that has moved me to share with you tonight some thoughts that will be troubling to us all, but which deserve our utmost attention.

I know a lot has been said recently about the challenges facing the Territory from an economic and budgetary perspective. I also know that nationally there is a waging debate around bigger or smaller government but I don't want to address any of those issues, because

regardless of whether we have bigger or smaller governments, tax increases, and budget reductions, we still need have a challenging situation in the Virgin Islands that we must address, and, I believe, one that I hope Paul Harris would have encouraged us to embrace.

I want to speak to you tonight about “The Invisible Tears of Semi-Visible and Invisible Children.” That may sound like a strange title for a festive gala speech, but my fellow Rotarians and their friends are always ready to be challenged, and I know we will step up to the challenge tonight. I know the Rotary does a lot for children around the world and here. But, there are still challenges we face.

As we move around this community, we see children walking to school in their brightly colored school uniforms. We see them in churches, temples and mosques. We hear them listening to music which we don’t understand and moving their bodies to a beat that our bodies long forgot how to make. They seem fine from a distance, and for some of us they even live in our homes. We believe we see them, but there are aspects to their lives that are invisible to us. Though on the surface we see their faces and sometime even their smiles, yet, for many of them, we don’t fully see them and we don’t see their invisible tears at all. Some are semi visible and crying because they are trapped in a cycle of violence and abuse that no one knows about. They are afraid to say anything and we aren’t asking the right questions. Some are crying because they live in poverty and must daily deal with the limitations and frustrations that come with that state. According to Kids Count 2009 published by the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands, 34% of the children in the U.S. Virgin Islands live in poverty. This is 14% higher than the National Child Poverty Rate, and the next worst in the U.S. (Only Puerto Rico is worst).

Others are semi visible and crying invisible tears because they have learning disabilities or other challenges that we as a community aren’t fully structured or equipped to address. The

invisible tears for others are due to the fact that the schools they attend don't inspire them to learn or do their best, and they have given up on their dreams and desires. Though many will not admit it, they know that their academic performance is not where they would like it to be, but they feel as if there is no way out.

These are our semi visible children. We see them; we even speak to them; but there is an aspect of their lives that we don't touch, and there is a pain and frustration that they experience that we never see. Some of us had the same invisible tears and no one saw ours either. So we assume that they will be fine, because we made it through the maze of adolescent challenges.

But then, there are the children who are completely invisible to most of us. They live on the fringes of society. They are the ones who have already dropped out of school, joined gangs, engaged in violent behavior, and have chosen a path that they feel will bring immediate joy to a frustrating and depressing life. Seventeen percent of our children between the ages of 16-19 are what Kids Count refers to as "detached youth", meaning they are not in school or employed. They are invisible to most of us until they appear on the pages of The Daily News, charged with some criminal violation. They become semi-visible to us when we become the victims of their actions, or the ones who must make hard decisions about their future.

But these invisible ones are crying invisible tears as well. They would never let us see those tears and they would do all they could to let us know they are without feelings. But they cry too. So much of their decision making process is rooted in a self belief that they are not loved– that no one really cares. They have concluded that the rules will not work for them; that the society is already corrupted, so why not just survive in an underworld of illegal activity.

I describe them this way not to make excuses for their acts, but to say that at the core of their reality, there is still a child; one of our children, who has made themselves invisible, and who we have allowed to remain invisible. I use this metaphor of invisibility to remind us that we must look with more than our physical eyes. We must see them with our hearts and our spirit. I use the metaphor of tears to remind us that our children have deep human needs and dreams, which, if left unaddressed, will turn into nightmares and unacceptable behavior that will limit their lives and potential, and sometimes destroy their lives and the lives of others.

When children live in poverty, they are more likely to enter school developmentally behind other children; more likely to have health problems and be abused. When they become adults they are more likely to be depressed, become substance abusers and have a greater chance of being incarcerated. These are the invisible tears of our children that we don't see, but are as real as the fact that night follows day. There will always be those who make themselves visible; there will always be those who will find the strength to wipe their own tears, or find that special person who will wipe the tears for them. But what about the rest who, for most of their childhood, will remain semi-visible or invisible and will cry tears those we as a society ignores?

So why do I raise this issue here, at this Gala event? Why do I remind us that there are semi-visible and invisible children in our midst? I share it because we are experiencing every day the results of their invisibility. We are all alarmed at the homicide rate in this Territory. We all talk about the rising incidents of crime among juvenile offenders. Even when we see a rise in adult criminal behavior, in most instances, it began in their youth.

We also see it in the academic performance of our students at all levels of our educational system. You as business leaders sometime see it in the lack of preparation and fundamental skills in the workplace.

So I raise this theme at this place, on this special night because gathered in this room are so many of the leaders of this community. Each of us is in a position to make these children more visible, and to wipe their tears away. More importantly, we have within our power, whether we admit it or not, the ability to ensure that there are no more invisible or semi-visible children born in future generations.

But, we can only make them visible and stop their tears if we, like Paul Harris, fully understand the benefits of putting "Service Above Self". We can only achieve this goal, if, like Paul Harris, we understand that unless we step out on our dreams and create something today, then there will be no answer tomorrow. Thus, future generations will suffer because of our inaction.

I raise it here because we stand a better chance of making them visible when those who are working daily to address these challenges receive the consistent support from those of us who can assist and support.

We stand a better chance of making them visible and wiping away their tears if we do a better job of working together in a collaborative manner. We keep them invisible when we spend so much of our energy blaming others and politicizing this moral obligation.

We make them visible when we ensure that there are positive and productive activities for them to do every moment of the day.

We really make them visible when we collectively agree that poverty in our community is unacceptable at any level and certainly at the level that it presently exists in the Virgin Islands. In a nation as rich as ours, we can solve this problem. With people as brilliant as you are, we can address this challenge.

I realize that these are lofty ideas, but the principles upon which the Rotary was founded and still stands are lofty ideals. To place service before self, to create a society of

“Fellowship and Friendship” in a society where we focus on the things that divide us, is also a lofty idea. So the Rotary reflects the best of what we must do as a society to share the burdens of the neediest among us.

There is a spiritual principle that says we will be judged ultimately by how we treat the “least of these”. Children in the Virgin Islands are certainly among the least of these because they are so dependent upon us. Many of them are without a voice in our political process. We design their education and we create and govern the organizations that are supposed to meet their needs. May we be judged by how much we make serving them a priority in our lives.

We can’t just continue to do what we have always done, because if we do, we will get what we have always gotten. We need to do extraordinary things so that these children will have ordinary lives, and not ones filled with trauma, abuse and limitations.

At UVI we are striving to make the youth in this community more visible to us. We are striving to bring them at as early an age as possible to our campus, and inspire them to stay on the educational path. We also plan to reach out to them, both males and females, to let them know we care and to let them know that they are special. We want to create an educational movement throughout the Territory that makes our youth a greater priority.

So we ask for your support in this effort, and we ask in the spirit of Paul Harris, for you to use your individual and collective resources and insights to change the reality of life for young males and females in this Territory.

When children cry and we see their tears, we usually know what to do. But when their tears are invisible and when they are invisible we often end up doing nothing. So, we must look more deeply into their eyes and more deeply into our hearts and make sure that the invisible are made visible.

The tears of the child are the tears of God. They spring from the same unpolluted well of humanity. But when we fail to see them, we fail to see the face of God, and thus we fail to see our calling here on earth.

The tears of a child, when they are invisible, are watering the fields of depression, anger, violence and social destruction. These fields, when we allow them to grow in our midst, will create a new landscape in this society that will change life as we know it.

Let us do all we can to make sure we see them and make their tears visible, and then wipe them away. When we do that then we are watering the fields of hope, prosperity and unlimited possibility. Then we will truly be embracing truth, pursuing fairness, building goodwill and better friendships, and dedicating our lives and work to something that will be beneficial to all concerned.

Then one day in the Virgin Islands, all of our children will be visible, and they will see us for the type of people we truly have become.