

THE HONORABLE RUFUS LEWIS  
90th BIRTHDAY PARTY  
November 26, 1996

Dr. Gwen Patton: We're all here today for Coach Lewis's, the Honorable Rufus Lewis', birthday, which is on November 30, which is Friday after Thanksgiving. Those of us at Trenholm decided we should get together and talk with the family, Mrs. Eleanor Dawkins and grandbaby, Karen, and thought we would give him a birthday party on the 26th to let him know that we are truly, truly thankful and grateful for all he's done for us in this community. Now, I'd like to introduce you to our president, Dr. Leroy Bell, President of Trenholm State Technical College. He is the man who is really pulling us together and making our school skyrocket. Dr. Bell.

Audience: (Applause.)

Dr. Leroy Bell: Dr. Patton, we certainly hope that is correct. Coach Lewis, first of all, we want to congratulate you on a wonderful life and on having reached this marvelous milestone. We all should be so lucky and fortunate.

Mr. Rufus Lewis: Talk a little louder so everyone can hear you. Everyone wants to hear what you're saying.

Dr. Leroy Bell: You are still a coach, aren't you?

Audience: (Laughter.)

Dr. Leroy Bell: It's a delight to be here with you and celebrate this wonderful life. And to thank you for the contributions you have made to this community and the totality of the cause throughout this country. Very few people where we work today appreciate the name H. Council Trenholm, but you knew him. And you know that when you say "Trenholm," it means educational opportunity in this state and many other states. He is the reason a lot of us stand here. He's probably the reason you had some of the opportunities you had to do the voting rights work and a great deal of the other work that you have done, and to even make the sacrifices. Very few people remember the struggles, Coach. They want to take the credit and glory. They don't remember the midnight rides, the little leaflets and the classes, and teaching how to pass a test that was ridiculous to start with. That by virtue of your citizenship and birthright, you had that right to vote which was being denied if it were not for people like you who pioneered and suffered, we would not have that privilege today. It is a delight that we are here to celebrate with you and we are happy that you are here to remind us of what our challenges are for the future. At Trenholm, we hope to preserve your papers and the papers of many others of you who I am soliciting now. I heard one nice young lady back there, Coach, who said, "get me my papers." I won't call her name because Gwen is going

to grab them if you don't. She has orders to grab them. And to try to persuade those of you who made these sacrifices and these contributions for these people long denied that will be forgotten if it were not for such archives as Alabama State and Trenholm try to preserve. Perhaps others would like to claim the credit for the movement that is now historically great without the appropriate credit to those who suffered and died that we might have the opportunity.

We thank you for coming. We thank you for giving us this wonderful life and we hope you have another 90.

Mr. Rufus Lewis: Thank you very much.

Audience: (Applause.)

Dr. Gwen Patton: Now I'd like to introduce you to Dr. Nina Beacham. She's our librarian at Trenholm State Technical College.

Dr. Nina Beacham: Honorable Coach Rufus Lewis, and to your family and the many wonderful folks who have come, all of these wonderful folks. I am just in awe to be a room with all of them. It is so wonderful for us. I would like to thank you on behalf of Dr. Bell, our president, the library staff, and the entire Trenholm family, for allowing us such an honor. It is indeed an honor for us to be able to house your wonderful collection. We had a lady here a few weeks ago from the National Archives and she said that is one of the most wonderful collections that she has ever seen. We are indebted to you for being so thorough in documenting and writing and in keeping together all of these wonderful things. We are so grateful that you have given Trenholm the honor of preserving them and we assure you that we will share them with this community, with this state, with this nation, and with the world. They are certainly worthy of cherishing. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts.

Mr. Rufus Lewis: Thank you.

Audience: (Applause.)

Dr. Leroy Bell: Dr. Beacham, are you going to tell about the new library tower?

Dr. Nina Beacham: I was supposed to tell you, Coach, where they will be housed. We have, as you know, a new library tower over on Mobile Road. It's a four-story facility and within that tower, Dr. Bell has given us a wonderful place for our archives. We will be totally automated. We are moving into the 21st Century and with us will go all of your wonderful papers. Once we are in and organized, we do want you to come and share in the Open House so that you can see where your papers will be. We have a wonderful place for them.

Mr. Rufus Lewis: I'll try not to forget that.

Dr. Nina Beacham: We won't let you. I was in a rush. I'm not hardheaded like my boss. She told us we had one minute, not a minute longer. He took as long as he wanted. I was trying to think about everything.

Dr. Leroy Bell: Tell him what it is right across the street from:

Dr. Nina Beacham: Right across the street from your library, Coach.

Mr. Rufus Lewis: Right across the street from my library.

Audience: (Applause and laughter.)

Dr. Gwen Patton: Has anybody seen any tubes here? Some round tubes--1956 article on Honorable Rufus Lewis and his Citizen's Club. You all remember the Citizen's Club up on Main Street. It was a picture of it. I assume or hope we will find it.

Dr. Leroy Bell: There it is, I believe, Gwen.

Dr. Gwen Patton: Okay, that might be for Mrs. Carr. There is another poster, too. This is for Mrs. Carr that I presented and let me do it again. This is a 1956 article from New York Post on the Montgomery Bus Boycott and on it has Hall Street Baptist Church. It was part of the Transportation Committee. This came out of Coach Lewis' papers. There is another one that says, "Come and go with us to the Citizen's Club." It has a neon sign. Remember that neon sign? It was a neon blue. It said you had to be registered voter to enter here. That is what I wanted to share with you. Coach, everyone has said what has been said, Dr. Bell, Dr. Beacham. We will take care of your papers. You have our word of honor, you have our trust. We are most grateful and humbled by it. We shared them with Dr. Bridges. Our project with the National Endowment with the Humanities. They've been on our campus and met with Dr. Bell. They are just elated about these papers and they are going to grant us many grants along the way to make certain that we preserve them in A-one, top-shelf order and expertise. I'd like to take this opportunity to say that we also have papers of Odessa Redding, as all of us know, an outstanding civil rights organizer and a community activist. We also have the papers of Mrs. Zecozy Williams. Zecozy brings her papers with her as she comes and I'm always so worried, to make sure she doesn't laminate them, and don't get them dog eared. That's why I'm always so worried about papers. I want to make sure that we have them. We also have the papers of Judge Charles Conley. All of these papers are very, very valuable. New York University wanted Judge Conley's papers, but he said, "No, I want my papers to stay here. I want them to stay at Trenholm State Technical College." He wanted the community people, particularly our students--the students whom we serve, to have ownership of these most valuable papers which heretofore have always been housed at Harvard University or Emory University or New York University and so forth. But our school, Trenholm State Technical College probably will have some of the most valuable papers in the country and in the world. Again, we thank you for being a pioneer. We

especially thank Mrs. Eleanor Dawkins, his daughter, because we had to negotiate and work things with her. Before we sing Happy Birthday, just let me make some introductions, then if people have some expressions that they would like to say to Coach Lewis in this public forum, please feel free to do so. I'd like to recognize before hand, Commissioner James Brown, another one of our elected officials. Coach Lewis.

Commissioner James Brown: How are you doing, Coach? Happy birthday. I am so happy I registered to vote under your school where I got training at Day Street Baptist Church back in 1956 when I became a resident of Montgomery County. Thank you, very much.

Mr. Rufus Lewis: (laughing). All right, you are welcome.

Dr. Gwen Patton: We would like to see Jerome Gray. He is now over the ADC--Alabama Democratic Conference. We all well know, one of the founders was Coach Rufus Lewis. Here is your legatee. Come on over here, Jerome.

Mr. Rufus Lewis and Mr. Jerome Gray: (exchange pleasantries.)

Dr. Gwen Patton: And here is Singfield. I guess he will be considered your great, great grandson in the voting rights struggle to continue your legacy. I consider you my grandfather, and he could be my child.

Mr. Rufus Lewis: Glad to see you. I'm glad to have you here. Thank you for being here.

Mr. Singfield: Yes sir.

Dr. Gwen Patton: And now we'd like to open up the podium to anybody who wishes to come and make some expressions to coach if you have not already done so. And if you have, you can do it again. Here is Dr. Richard Baily. We haven't seen him yet.

Dr. Richard Baily: Congratulations, coach.

Mr. Rufus Lewis: Thank you, so much.

Dr. Richard Bailey: I thank you for giving your papers to Trenholm and putting them in the hands of people who will really take good care of them. Thank you very much.

Mr. Rufus Lewis: You are welcome.

Dr. Gwen Patton: Are there any other expressions?

Mr. Joe Dickerson: Let me just say one thing. I think that when you look at it, we started way back in 1946 working with Rufus, working with Mrs. Zecozy, working with Mrs. Idessa Redding,

and Mr. Gibbs. Many long years when it wasn't so acceptable for you during that time. Everything was there to discourage you. But as I stand here, I feel proud today. If anybody told me that this man's record would be preserved on the Civil Rights Trail from Selma to Montgomery . . . God works in mysterious ways. You never know what the future holds for you. But there it will stand out as people marched from Selma to Montgomery. We tried to do something on the Council when I was there, Mr. Gilmore, and (Mr.) Hammond. We decided to build a library and name it in his honor--Rufus A. Lewis Library on the Civil Rights Trail. We didn't know this was going to be designated. But when people work like Mr. Lewis, we would go down . . . I tell you this because some of you don't know. We organized the second congregational district, the best district in the state of Alabama. Well organized. We would go down in Evergreen, Joe Reed was just a little 'ole boy, then. Just a baby. We were successful in motivating and encouraging people to go to the polls. We had a group of people working with us. Dr. Camelia from Tuskegee. Judge Peter Hall in Birmingham. Mr. Cobb down in Luverne. Mrs. Warren in Troy. And our local people, Mrs. Zecozy Williams, Idessa Redding, Mr. Gibbs, people that did it religiously. That was a Sergeant Williams at Maxwell Field. Everyday! You all remember, (they) were right with us. That's why you look at it sometimes and wonder why people won't go to the polls and vote. A lot of people died. Died for this privilege. We shouldn't take it lightly. We should do it and do it from our hearts because it made a difference. I just want to say, Dr. Rufus, thank you.

Mr. Rufus Lewis: You're welcome. (Audience applause.)

Dr. Gwen Patton: We have one more expression. Come on, Councilman Gilmore.

Councilman Mark Gilmore: I want to say good evening to everybody. It is a pleasure to be here. To Coach Lewis and his family (and I was just like part of his family, I was raised right down the street) . . . many times I ate from him, as he ate from in the Gilmore home. Moma called him Cuz. When I was put in jail in 1957, beaten half to death in Oak Park, it was this gentleman, along with two others, who came to the city jail where I stayed eight weeks with no medical attention, no food. He asked the jailer down there at that time which is the morgue now, "Do you have a young man here by the name of Mark Gilmore?" He replied, "We don't have that nigger here." He asked again, "Do you have a young man . . ." I'll can't forget it. I was in a bunker that had eight bunks, iron bunks. You had to get water out of the commode if you wanted it, or do without. I said, "I'm Mark Gilmore." He said, "You're talking about that nigger right there?" He (Coach Lewis) said, "That's the man I'm talking about." My mother didn't know where I was. She was sick. It was Mr. Lewis, along with Dr. Seay, and one other gentleman, who came and got me out of jail. The movement started with Mrs. Parks from that Mr. Lewis. Not knowing that day that I would be in the position that I am, but thanks to you, I've been able to be part, been able to work hard in this city, and carry on your legacy. I also thank you when I went to the court house when I used to call, I used to have to go in the court room up stairs on the last floor where this little old lady would be. She would ask you how many cows your moma had, how many stars in that flag. I paid poll tax by then. And I just want to thank you for sitting with me, carrying me through that test. I

became a registered voter. I thank God for you, your life, and your family today. You're going to live a long time, Cuz.

Audience: (Applause.)

Dr. Gwen Patton: We have one last expression, unless there is someone who wants to say something.

\_\_\_\_\_ : I just want to say one thing. I'm the thief in the crowd. I went down to the court house and I stole the papers because we did not have the application . . . the registration questionnaire. We did not have it. Mrs. Dent balled it up and threw it in the garbage can. And I have them. I have them today for anybody to look at. I'm the thief in the crowd!

Dr. Gwen Patton: We would like to have a few words, brief words, from Ella Bell. When I was going through some of Coach Lewis' papers, he would have handwritten notes. One name that just kept coming up . . . and they were not comments, they were instructions . . . he would have "Ella Beatrice" underlined a million different times telling her what to do. "Ella, get the leaflets." "Ella Beatrice, go to church." Ella Beatrice. Ella Beatrice. Let us introduce Ella.

Ella Bell: Well, you know, for me, this is an absolutely wonderful time. I don't know of anyone that I would rather give any kind of tribute to on this earth than you, Rufus Lewis. For a number of reasons . . . Rufus Lewis was mother's, as I call it, official escort. They went to all the dances in town together. We stayed in shops finding pretty dresses because "he can *dance*." That's one thing, he *can* dance. As a result of his relationship with my mother, I became very much involved in his political activities. If there is such a person who has to be called one's mentor, if there is a person to be called the director of one's political thoughts, he is certainly mine. You remember the Relf case when the health department had sterilized them without their knowledge, it became a national scandal. Essence magazine was brand new. They sent down a young lady to cover this story named Darryl West Alexander who was later to become the editor of Essence. She wrote a nine-page article on this heinous offense by the Montgomery Health Department and of all the activities and the activities in response to this came as a result of the actions and activities and the Montgomery County Democratic Conference of which Rufus Lewis was the chair. And I was his able-bodied run person. I was the "fetch me" person. I traveled with Coach all over. I went to all kinds of political meetings with him. I've been all through this second congressional district with him. He and Tom Wright and Lou . . . we were just always together. He taught me all that I ever wanted to know about this arena called politics. In 1974, after the re-districting or what was it called when the legislature was completely redone . . . we had a practically new legislature. Coach was one of the first Black members of the legislature. The legislature was . . . they were invited to the University of Alabama to be taught about all their new duties and responsibilities. I was working for a gentleman at Alabama, at that time, on this particular project. But when it came time to get tickets to go, there was not a ticket for me. There was

a ticket for the three little white girls who had worked on this project with us, but none for me. I was very disappointed because I wanted to see all of these new Black elected officials. It happened that Rufus Lewis came. They were at the Ramada Inn, downtown Tuscaloosa. The telephone rang. Hello, Sweet Petunia, this is Coach. Meet me down at the Ramada Inn. We've got some meets. It ended up that we were at the University club for the University. I met Paul Bear Bryant who said to him, "Coach, it's so good to see you." Coach said to him, "It's so good to see you too, let me introduce you to my daughter. She's working on her doctorate here at Alabama." I got to know Bear Bryant through his man right here. He was wonderful. He's everything that you would want your model to be. That's him. And I love him dearly. Thank you so much.

Dr. Gwen Patton: We needed a program of this type because all of us are really his offspring. Here we have with us, John Knight, another legatee of your work and your efforts. Representative Knight, would you like to come and say a few words, and say happy birthday to him.

Mr. John Knight: Thank you very much, Gwen. Coach, first of all, I'd like to say happy birthday! I'd just like to say that growing up here in Montgomery and having known Coach all my life, or since living in Montgomery, he has certainly been an inspiration. And there are so many of us in this city and throughout this state and this nation, that really stand on his shoulders because he's paved the way. I serve on the legislature now because he's paved the way because of so much hard work that you have done in this community and I want to let you know that I certainly appreciate that. I can remember when I first joined the Montgomery County Democratic Conference years ago under your leadership. You taught us so much, those of us who were students at Alabama State University. And having been raised right here on Hall Street, I have been able to admire your work throughout the years. It's just so fortunate to have someone of your caliber in this community, somebody who's committed to making a difference and (who) has made a difference for all of us. We would not be in elected positions if it were not for you. We wouldn't hold some of the positions that many of us hold today if it were not for you. My hat is off to you and I just hope I can make it to my 90th birthday as well. You're certainly looking very well and I just want to say thank you for the things that you've done for this community and for those things you have done for me personally. Thank you very much and I shall never forget it.

Mrs. Redding: Happy birthday, Mr. Lewis. You are not too far ahead of me. I have one tomorrow. I will be 84. (Audience applause.) To you elected officials, I am still going to the podiatrist for my feet for the times that I walked the blocks of Montgomery, the city and the county, trying to get our people registered, and do what Mr. Lewis had advised us to do. It wasn't easy. It was very, very hard. I can recall going down on the Old Hayneville Road, and I just didn't think and didn't want to park my car in this man's driveway. And it's a good thing I didn't because I had to back out with a shot gun pointed at me like this saying, "What are you talking about voting. You better get out from here nigger, you don't know nothing about no voting." Now every time I pass that trailer when I go down on the Old Hayneville Road, I

think about it. But Mr. Lewis would be with us at night. In the day, all through the day, he would come to my house, Mrs. Bertha Smith's house, (and) Mrs. Williams' house, to tell us what we needed to do. We had block workers. We had precinct workers. After all of that we still had trouble when we would get to the polls trying to get the people to go in to vote. The way we got a roll, we had to sit 30 feet from the poll. Every black person who went to the poll, we got their names. There were some Blacks who were a little skeptical about giving us their names. That's how we run down the number of Black people who were voting back in the 50s. Thank you, Mr. Lewis. I enjoyed working with you. You are not tired by yourself.

Dr. Gwen Patton: I think there's an announcement.

\_\_\_\_\_: I just want to congratulate Coach Lewis on his birthday. I don't have to talk about everybody else to talk about what he did and I'm sure those of us who were there remember quite well the things that Coach Lewis did. I can remember so many things that we went through together. I served as secretary of transportation of the MIA (Montgomery Improvement Association) at one time and I've been working with him all down through the years. Sometimes we sing that song about "I've come too far from where I started from, I ain't got tired yet." I'm lying when I say that because I am tired. But my announcement is . . . On the 5th, which is next Thursday, the Montgomery Improvement Association will be celebrating its 41st Anniversary. We're going to be out at Shakespeare. Some of the persons who are sitting here now have been invited to participate in this anniversary at which time we want young people to be there so they can hear the story of what we're talking about here today. And they can know from persons like Idessa, Zecozie, and others, what they went through with to get to where we are today. My philosophy is this, "If you don't know where you came from, you can't appreciate where you are and you cannot chart your way to where you would like to go." On Thursday, the 5th, from 6 'till 8, we will be at Shakespeare Theatre. We are asking all people to come. You don't have to pay no fees. The only thing is you have to get yourself out there. And, of course, we don't have transportation for you. Sunday night at 6:00 we will be at Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church climaxing our anniversary. Judge U. W. Clemons will be our speaker. You are cordially invited. January 1, 1997, God bless us, we'll be at Bethel Baptist Church, with our Emancipation. An I don't want you to forget that because that's another phase of where you came from. So appreciate it and celebrate it. Dr. Lett of Selma will be our speaker. The program will be at 10:00 in the morning, January 1, 1997, at Bethel Baptist Church. Those are my announcements.

Dr. Gwen Patton: Thank you.

Councilman Mark Gilmore: On the second week in December, Coach Lewis, we're going to honor St. Jude (I still call it St. Jude), and the parish and the hospital. That's the first place that we camped when we marched from Selma to Montgomery. The landmark will be put there. We also have the lights on the trail on my desk now to sign off. The city will be lighting up the

trail coming through Montgomery like the movement came. We invite everyone to come and take a part in it.

Dr. Gwen Patton: Thank you. Now before we get ready to sing in a very joyous way, "Happy Birthday," there are plans under way to put a plaque out here in front of Coach Lewis' home. His office, young people, I want you to go and see his office. His home has always been a political haven where he did his work. Look at the artifacts. We invited the young democrats so they can continue that legacy and see. There are only two houses on this Bolivar Street. We will try, and we'll need the city council people and the elected officials, to name this Rufus Lewis Avenue. This little small, short street here. Also, on this street, on Dericote, young people, all of these folks on this street were warriors. Some of them are not here now. But this is like Veterans Freedom Row, freedom fighters. Mrs. Smiley, Mrs. Gilmore, Mrs. Bryant, can tell you all about it. Patti, Mrs. Cooks, the Adairs, all of them. My grandparents, if you will. We're trying to get this whole area designated as a historical spot with Coach Rufus Lewis being the centerpiece. That's our birthday present to you in our efforts.

Let us all join together, please. Let us stand and surround him. Eleanor! She's getting things ready. There's Karen. Karen, would you like to come up here or would you rather just stay there? Let us all . . . Mrs. Carr . . . not on such high key. Mrs. Carr has a beautiful soprano voice.

Mrs. Carr: I used to have.

ALL: Happy Birthday song.