



**Mayor Steve Williams**  
City of Huntington

**Inaugural address of Mayor Steve Williams**  
**Jan. 3, 2013**  
**Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center**

On behalf of my fellow members and colleagues on City Council, thank you so very much for joining us tonight. Thank you for the complement you show to each of us by coming to this event and remembering our past and celebrating our future.

We all came to you this past spring and fall with hopes and aspirations for a more dynamic and prosperous community. We met with you in your living rooms, churches, community centers and schools. We met in cafés, restaurants, hotel lobbies and, yes, we even waved to one another on street corners.

You told us about your concerns, but you also shared your dreams.

We are concerned about the viability of our neighborhoods. We want the blight to stop. We are frightened when we read about vacant buildings begin burned down. We want to be able to sit on our porches and watch our children and grandchildren play in our front yards.

We are concerned about crime. While we realize it has gotten better, we still have a sense of unease. We detest that our communities have been targeted by thugs and opportunists from other cities to peddle their chemical concoctions.

We simply want to feel safe again.

We are frustrated when we have to dodge potholes as we drive across town. And we cannot understand how city traffic has to be rerouted every time there is a rainstorm.

We are tired of the decay of our city.

And most of all, it frustrates us that our children have to move somewhere else to find opportunity for employment. We welcome students from all over the world, yet when they complete their education they cannot even to choose to stay in the area if they want.

We are educating and nurturing our best and brightest only to send them off to other communities to benefit from the training we provided.

Yes, we are concerned and frustrated. Yet, there is also a bubbling sense of hope, a pulsating feeling within that we can do better. With that feeling of optimism develops a sense of expectation.

Our neighborhoods are becoming more active and vibrant:

- In Gallaher Village and in the Southside we are building our own neighborhood parks.
- In Fairfield, we have taken our streets back. Our churches, neighbors and police have joined hands to actively say “not in our neighborhood” to out-of-state hoodlums. We are protecting our children and creating opportunity in our neighborhood again.
- In Westmoreland, Highlawn, Guyandotte and Altizer, we are restoring the voice that we heard from our parents and grandparents, saying, “We take care of our own.”
- In the downtown, we see empty buildings beginning to be restored. People are coming back. An energy is returning.



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The city came together and competed against cities much larger than ours and resoundingly won funding for a new dog park.

Our own Ritter Park was recognized as one of the best public spaces in the nation.

Marshall University is steadily establishing itself as a research institution. Engineering is returning because of the generous contribution of the Weisberg family. This demonstrates that when a locally-owned business is given an opportunity to compete and thrive -- when the decisions relating to the growth and development of that business are made here in Huntington and not in some far-off city -- the wealth created is often utilized to nurture the environment that permitted the enterprise to flourish.

Yes, we have many issues to contend with, but we realize we have more opportunities arising out of those issues.

Along with the rest of the nation, we are enduring the most severe economic downturn since the 1930s. And we don't know if we have made it through yet.

But, we have been here before, haven't we? We have had difficult times.

Why, even in this wonderful entertainment palace that was constructed in 1928 -- less than a decade after its opening -- the Keith-Albee found itself floating in the middle of the overflowing Ohio River. These very seats that each of you are sitting in were enveloped in the dark murky waters of the Ohio. Somehow, this complex and the rest of downtown and even our neighborhoods dug ourselves out and not only survived, but also found a way to continue to grow at record proportions for the next 25 years.

Yes, indeed we have had difficult times. None more difficult than what we experienced on November 14, 1970.

Our city was dealt a blow that nearly took us out. We will never forget the horror of those days. Yet, somehow, we stood together and helped nurture and love those families who were torn apart. We are determined to never forget. And because of that determination, the families who forever lost the voices of those who they cherished and loved so deeply, those families picked up and continued on. So many of the children and grandchildren of those who were lost, so many who are sitting among us today, are now the leaders who we depend upon to guide our businesses, give us legal advice, educate our children, lead our churches and inform us of the day's events.

Our lives and our present day existence are defined by these horrific events.

Because of the direct influence that November 14, 1970 played in my life, through the opportunity I had to be a member of the Young Thundering Herd football team in the years following the crash, because so many of the people who I have grown to love and respect were family members of those who were lost, this picture of the 1970 Football Team is displayed on the stage. What is missing in the picture are the 25 leaders of our community who were lost. They are represented by those who sit among us tonight.

Yes, we have lived through difficult times. This portrait will be on the wall in my office at City Hall to remind everyone who visits that Huntington's character is a city that is resilient and carries on.

We have a wonderful heritage.

Those who built our city had a pride and a vision that enabled us, even to the present day. Enjoy the fruits of their ambitions. Yes, ambitions. Ambition and resolve established the city of wide, tree-lined streets. Those who built our city created opportunity to carve out a special haven in the Ohio Valley where families could be reared and businesses could be developed and their children could be educated.



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We still bask in the glow of the dreams and aspirations that were realized by those who came before us. This lovely auditorium is a wonderful example of how the Hyman family wouldn't settle for the ordinary. The Frederick Hotel across the street was the quintessential example of opulence and elegance in its day. It still carries the aura of distinction to this day.

Marshall University and Mountwest Community and Technical College are each examples of decisions made long ago and strategies implemented in more recent times. They have transformed themselves to meet the expectations of the market and the needs of the region. Marshall's efforts in constructing an engineering school and the ongoing growth of the Medical School create untold entrepreneurial opportunities.

Mountwest in similar fashion is structured to immediately address the needs of the region by becoming the one entity that will train all those who will be drawn into the businesses that will be created through the research opportunities resulting from Marshall's research and engineering programs.

Huntington has seen days of exceptional excellence. We find ourselves at a precipice, at a tipping point. Enthusiasm abounds. A sense of opportunity is in the air. We must harness this enthusiasm to propel ourselves forward or we will be relegated to continued mediocrity.

My years in business have taught me that to be successful, if we are to be recognized as being truly exceptional, we must first know who our competition is. Secondly, we need to know what we do best. And lastly, then commit to success.

Who is our competition? It certainly isn't Charleston, or Ashland or even Barboursville or Parkersburg or Wheeling.

Our competition is Lexington, Ky., Louisville, Cincinnati, Columbus, Pittsburgh, Indianapolis, Charlotte. Yes, even Chicago.

When we are competing for business or developers who are looking to invest their dollars, investors and entrepreneurs are looking at what the value proposition is in these markets. We cannot expect to be Lexington or Louisville or Cincinnati or Pittsburgh. If we do, we come across as a cheap imitation. But we can come across as a genuine article, a proud City of Huntington that offers what none of these communities can hope to offer.

We are Huntington, which leads us to the second point. In order to compete effectively, we must know who we are and the resources that we have to become the best in the world to create a world-class environment that is only available here.

When we truly know and understand who we are and what we do best, we assemble the ingredients necessary to become an exceptional city.

There is no other Marshall University. There is no other Mountwest Community and Technical College. There is no other city with a world-class museum, with the best public park space in the nation, with a loving, nurturing community that stands shoulder to shoulder and lifts one another up when despair or tragedy abounds.

We need to know who we are and what we do that no place on earth can do.

If you believe as I do that each of us are blessed with talents and traits that are so unique that we each are placed on this earth for a very specific purpose. And that if we don't fulfill that purpose it will go unfilled. If you believe that we each are that unique in our gifts that there is not another person on this earth who can replace what each of us can individually offer.



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Then it is not a huge leap to then conclude the same can be said about our city, about our community and about our neighborhoods. If we are truly a community -- a group of individual souls with common unity -- we together with all our traits and talents make up a City of Huntington that is unlike any place on earth and provides services and a lifestyle unmatched by any community in the world.

If we are truly that unique of a community, we then don't have to worry about competing. We simply find ourselves committed to being ourselves.

There is greatness in us. And recognizing that, we then have to commit to success. Commit to being ourselves. We must know our competition. Know what we do best and then commit.

However we proceed, with whatever level of enthusiasm we are able to muster, we must walk in with our eyes wide open. We must face some brutal facts. If we are going to commit, we must also understand there is a required commitment.

It will not be easy to accomplish what we hope to achieve. It shouldn't be. Our city has monumental challenges before it. To become a beacon of opportunity in the Ohio Valley we must understand that it will not be accomplished overnight.

Our transition team did a wonderful job outlining how we should proceed. The city needs additional revenue. We are committed to deriving that revenue without raising taxes, but by improving our services and becoming more strategic in the way we do our business. Become smarter in how we manage our projects and our employees.

Three committees of the transition team pointed out that we need to be smarter about how we manage our resources. We are committed to creating an inclusive environment where each person is valued, treated with dignity and, as a result, is provided employment certainty so they can provide for their families.

We are committed to become more aggressive and strategic in how we welcome business into the city and that we will identify and collect what is properly owed. We are, in turn, committed to assure that we are innovative and strategic in how we invite, entice and attract investment into our community.

Once again, we must be on the cutting edge, providing what cannot be provided elsewhere.

We are committed to being frugal in the manner of how we manage our budget. Already, I have implemented a freeze on all nonessential spending, a hiring freeze that requires my signature to add any new employees, and we will be enacting an across-the-board reduction on all budgets to not exceed 2 percent.

Yesterday, we opened labor negotiations with the firefighters and AFSCME workers. We expect that those will be completed this spring.

We have to strengthen our Police Department, Fire Department and Public Works Department by being innovative in how we cause revenues to increase by creating an environment nurturing economic growth. The easy way to increase revenue would be to increase taxes. As much as we need additional revenue, there will be a cathartic effect by refusing to increase taxes and by creating a healthy environment where additional revenues come as a result of a growing economy.

To pursue this strategy requires skill, requires attention and requires tenacity. Dogged determination to this goal will assure each of you that this city's administration will be administered in a world-class manner.



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Will we accomplish all that we aspire to accomplish in the next 90 days? Of course not. Will it be in a year? Who knows? That isn't what is important. What is important is that we have an unending and unwavering faith that we will prevail in the end.

That unending and unwavering faith in our ability to prevail is forged through individual and collective commitment. Commitment to accept that we will succeed even when we face failure. Commitment to carry on no matter the bleakness of the moment.

This is our heritage. This is the foundation on which we stand.

My nephew Benjamin's admonition that he read to us earlier about commitment speaks to this point: "Until one is committed, there is hesitance, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. In all acts of initiative and creation, there is one elemental truth the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans. That the moment one commits one self, providence moves, too."

The quotation goes on from there.

The author continues to say, "All sorts of things occur to help one that would never have otherwise occurred. A whole stream of events arises from the decision, raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance which no man could have dreamed would come his way."

I challenge each of you. I challenge all of us. Whatever hope, whatever aspiration, whatever dream you have for your family, whatever expectation you have for our city -- dream big, aspire for excellence, expect greatness, expect accomplishment so enormous that it will cause you to hyperventilate with excitement.

There is greatness within us. With God's guidance, we restore our exceptional heritage.

As Robert Browning wrote, "If our reach should not exceed our grasp, then what's a heaven for?"

We must be bold in our pursuit of excellence, and brave in our aspirations. Boldness has genius and power and magic in it. Let us begin it now.