



Speech written and delivered by Marcus Harrison Green, September 18, 2025 at SEED's Envision event

Good evening.

Thank you for having me.

There's so much history in this room. You can feel it in the walls, in the floorboards, in the way the air hums with memory. And clearly, SEED went all out tonight...the entertainment, the MC, Northwest Tap. But I may be most impressed that they had the radical idea to give this keynote speaking gig to someone actually from the neighborhood. That's practically historic, trust me, I've been to plenty of so-called "community" galas where the only thing local was the Wi-Fi password.

As a working journalist, I can tell you it's not an easy job. Most days the news cycle feels less like a cycle and more like a hurricane you're supposed to lasso somehow.

But here's the great thing about this work: journalism lets you sit front row for the long arc of a community's story. You see its triumphs, its grief, its messy, complicated, breathtaking beauty. You see where the narrative bends, where it breaks, and the stubborn places where it refuses to. And if you're lucky, you get to be part of helping it bend toward something better.

And yes, sometimes you get cussed out (with love, of course) for telling the truth about it.

For me, it is a blessing to write about a place where I was born and raised, where I have spent most of my four decades on this earth. But the burden of being a journalist in this moment is that we live with questions that refuse to resolve. We live haunted.

Eleven years ago, when I was founding the *South Seattle Emerald*, our very first intern — a kid barely old enough to vote, but already channeling his inner skeptic, asked me:

"Do you ever think all you're doing is chronicling the death of a community? Bearing witness to its slow crawl into oblivion?"

My first response was, of course: "Kid, if don't shut the hell up.... You're 17 going on 65, and I am not about to spiral into the abyss with you right now. I've got enough existential dread on my plate."

But that question has followed me ever since.

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It follows me most when I think about my mother, Cynthia, who spent her childhood running through the streets of the Central District, who knew every porch, every neighbor, every store owner by name. My mother, who still won't walk through that neighborhood today, because when she does, all she sees are absences.

She sees the block where her best friend's family home used to stand, now a boutique selling candles that cost more than her weekly grocery budget. She sees the church that baptized her, now a condo lobby with a key fob entry. She sees the corner store where her mother sent her for milk, now a wine bar where she doesn't recognize a single face.

She tells me she can't go back because it hurts too much to walk through a place where memory has been evicted.

And that ache...that refusal, lives in me.

It follows me when I help neighbors pack up their lives into U-Hauls because this city — the one where they had first loves and first heartbreaks, where they baptized their babies, where they built everything — no longer has room for them.

And it followed me last month when I met an 80-year-old grandmother.

She had invited me to her "home," and when I arrived, it wasn't an apartment or a house — it was a Ford Escort parked in a Safeway lot. She was raising three grandchildren, one with severe autism. She told me she had lived in this city her entire life, paid taxes here, worked here, buried her husband here — and now she could not afford to stay here.

That night her and her grandchildren shared a single can of tuna for dinner. And I stood there in that parking lot, watching one of the richest cities in the richest country in the world reduce a grandmother, to a car seat.

If you ever wonder why I can't shake that intern's question, that's why.

There are moments when you wish...no, demand... that the highest of us would actually see the lowest of us. Maybe then, in a city where \$96,000 a year still counts as "scraping by," we might rediscover empathy.

So yes, there are days when I am tempted to pick up the phone, call that intern, and say, "You were right. All I've been doing is writing the obituary of a community."

But I can't. And I won't.

Because I know this community. I know its stubbornness, its brilliance, its wild insistence on survival.

I think back to being 10 years old at a gas station in Rainier Beach, watching a Jewish man's car break down. Within minutes, a line of neighbors appeared — Black, Somali, Filipino, Muslim, Latino — strangers, all of them. They got behind that car, pushed him forward, and didn't stop until he was pointed home.

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That's the spirit SEED was founded on 50 years ago.

Back in 1975, when Southeast Seattle was left for dead: redlined, disinvested, abandoned by capital and city hall... our neighbors refused to let the story end there. They became their own developers, their own advocates, their own city planners. They built something new from the ashes.

Tonight, we sit in a Columbia City business district that would have been a boarded-up ghost town if SEED hadn't stepped in to save it. We live in a city where more than 1,000 families sleep under roofs SEED built. And through SEEDArts, we see walls that might have been blank or painted over now turned into murals that speak, murals that testify. We see galleries where kids are not just consuming culture but creating it, stages where their voices echo back against the narrative that says they don't belong.

This is not charity. This is power. This is a community refusing erasure.

Yes, Southeast Seattle has changed. Yes, the ground is still shifting under our feet. But this place only truly dies when we stop fighting for it, when we stop believing in one another, stop showing up for each other, when we let the death crawl become destiny.

And as long as I have lived here, this community has never done that.

That's why SEED matters, because it refuses to surrender hope, even when hope feels impossible. It reminds us that a future worth building still waits for us, if we have the courage to shape it.

But that future is not guaranteed. It does not crash down like thunder from the sky, it is forged, quietly and relentlessly, in thousands of small choices. Your choices. My choices. The choices of everyone in this room.

So tonight, I am asking you to choose.

Choose the vision where Southeast Seattle is still the soul of this city 50 years from now. Choose the vision where kids are still playing in pocket parks, where working families can still afford to live in the neighborhoods they built, where artists are still telling the truth on our walls, where diversity isn't just a word in a brochure but a living, breathing reality.

That future is possible, but only if we will it into being.

And I think of that grandmother. I think of her in her car in that parking lot, her hands opening that can of tuna, her grandbabies asleep in the backseat.

Fifty years from now, I want those kids to tell a different story. I want them to be able to say that this city made room for them, that we made sure their story didn't end in a Safeway parking lot.

When the most vulnerable among us asks... ten years from now...fifty years from now: 'Did you simply watch this place slip into oblivion, or did you fight for it?' I want us to be able to answer without hesitation:

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We fought. We stayed. We built.

And we made sure Southeast Seattle remained what it has always been, not just a place on a map, but a home worthy of the people who love it

Because like it or not, this is our charge. Nothing is definitively written, not the story of this neighborhood, not the story of this city, not the story of us. Any hope for a better future comes from willing that future into being, from building it brick by brick, mural by mural, act of courage by act of courage.

Our cause may be noble, but it only becomes real through the lives it touches, the families it shelters, the dreams it makes possible.

And if we choose that future, the one built on kindness, trust, and a relentless belief in each other, then generations from now, when children walk these streets, they won't just see what we saved.

They'll see what we built.

I can tell you as someone forced to follow the news every day, darkness can seem so overwhelming. But if we choose, we can create a community stronger than whatever darkness may come our way. Now, can you envision that? I hope so. Our community depends on it.

Thank you.